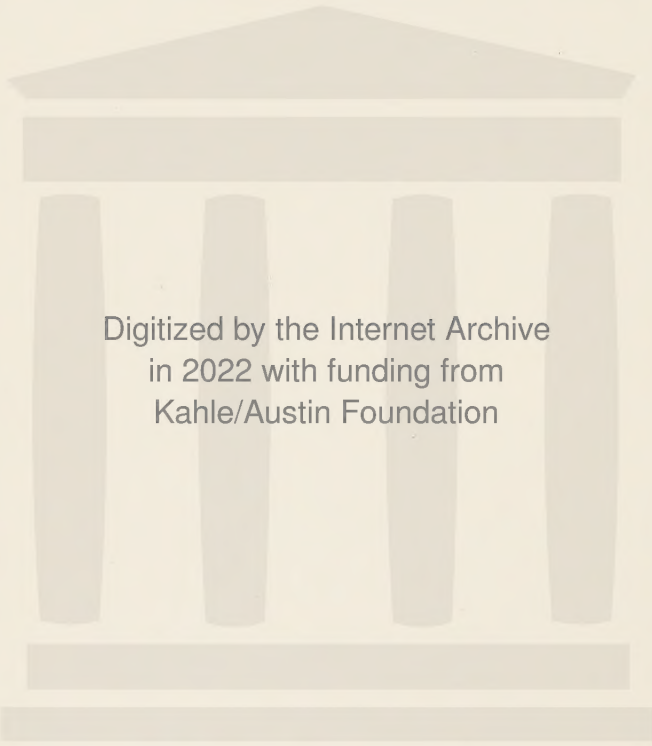




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HISTORY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY
OF GREAT BRITAIN

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN

*VOLUME ONE:
FORMATION AND EARLY YEARS,
1919-1924*

by
JAMES KLUGMANN

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This volume is dedicated to the foundation members of the Party.
I am conscious how small an offering it is to those to whom we owe so
much. It is harder to make history than to write it.

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PREFACE

This first volume of the History of the Communist Party of Great Britain treats the period of foundation of the Party and its early struggles from 1920 to the end of 1924. Included, though not in the same detail, is a history of the foundation and early days of the Young Communist League, and of movements in which the Party played a major part, like the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement and the National Minority Movement.

In this volume I have plunged directly into the negotiations in 1919–1920 for the formation of a Communist Party. I am hoping, later, to prepare a volume dealing with the background to the formation of the Party, particularly with the period 1912–1920.

The second volume of this history which covers the period 1925–1927 is already written and will appear under the title *The General Strike, 1925–1927*. It will contain a number of Appendices—on the Party's publications, its successive leaderships, etc., which cover the period from 1920 to the beginning of 1927 and refer, therefore, to the first as well as to the second volume.

I shall be beginning in mid-1968, in co-operation with Jack Cohen, the third volume of this History. This will start with the 1927 period.

I have tried throughout the first two volumes to present the history of the Communist Party, not as something isolated, separate, in itself, but as part of, within the context of, the general Labour Movement. Treated as a cold succession of Congresses, Theses, Resolutions, the Party can never be understood, though this has been a method often favoured by those who write of the Party in order to belittle or condemn it. The Communist Party grew out of the working-class movement. It continued and developed the revolutionary traditions in the British Labour Movement. Its own *internal* development cannot be understood in isolation from the movement outside, any more than the impact of the Communist Party on the general movement can be understood without relation to its own internal development. The Party must be judged not only by its formal resolutions and statements, but by what it said and *did* in the struggles of the day, and in comparison

(or contrast) with what other sections of the movement were saying and doing.

I am grateful to the many comrades who helped with the different aspects of work involved, above all to Frank Jackson, the Communist Party Librarian. I am especially grateful to those who read and commented on the first draft—R. Page Arnot, J. R. Campbell, Idris Cox (first three chapters), R. Palme Dutt, Frank Jackson, John Mahon and Andrew Rothstein. Harry Pollitt gave me much assistance when I first began to collect material. But none of these must be held guilty for the judgements made in this book nor for its many weaknesses.

Bob Stewart's *Memoirs—Breaking the Fetters*—published on his ninetieth birthday, February 16, 1967, came too late for me to use in this first volume, but Bob has given me considerable help.

The volume of work involved was very great, particularly as documentation was widely scattered, and often incomplete. Bad health interrupted the work on several occasions. And much of it was done in the course of and alongside other political responsibilities.

I know that there are many gaps in it, that justice will not have been done to many of those who played big parts in the early days, that there will be many omissions, especially of the local struggles, and, surely, inaccuracies that need correcting.

May I in this relation make a double plea. First, that all those who discover errors or omissions inform me of them and that all those who have recollections of these early struggles put them in writing or on tape and let us have them for the Party Library. They will enable any further edition to be corrected and improved, and will be available for future students. Secondly, may I ask all those who have pamphlets, leaflets, press cuttings, photos, internal documents, etc., relevant to those early days, to lodge them or at least copies of them with our Library.

It was very hard in the stormy years of the early 20's for those involved in the struggle to maintain records and personal libraries. Police raids took most of the early archives. Unemployment, poverty, lack of accommodation, did not lend themselves to neatly compartmentalised filing systems. Many an early leaflet or pamphlet, dog-eared and torn, virtually dropped to pieces as it was passed on from hand to hand. In those days official institutes and libraries were not interested in the documents of the revolutionary movement. It is an ironic (and pleasing) historical comment that today these same libraries and institutes are begging for them, that antiquarian booksellers offer them at fantastic prices, and that writers of Ph.D. theses hunt them in shoals.

This is, of course, an openly partisan history. I believe that all histories are, in a sense, partisan, but not all consciously, and certainly not all admittedly. The years described were before my political time (I joined the Communist Party as a 21-year-old student at Cambridge University in 1933). I therefore came to the period without ready-made opinions about the role of this or that movement, or meeting, or leaders.

But I came to it as a Communist. And, having studied the period, with all its problems and growing pains and weaknesses, I should add, I am more than ever convinced of the need for and role of a Communist Party in Britain.

I have not, in the course of the book, polemised with other writers on the subject. Mr. Pelling's book did not seem to me serious. Mr. Macfarlane's study of the first nine years of the Party is a serious book. But when it appeared I had completed the draft of my own book; I did not therefore use Mr. Macfarlane's, nor did I think it helpful to introduce polemic on the points where we disagree. Readers who are interested can find out these for themselves.

JAMES KLUGMANN

October, 1967

CHAPTER I

THE FORMATION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Need for a Communist Party—The Socialist Organisations—Other Participants—The First Soundings—Unity Negotiations Second Stage—Preparing the Unity Convention—Communist Unity Convention—Debate on Parliamentary Action—Debate on Affiliation to the Labour Party—Organisation and Leadership—Second Congress of Communist International—Lenin on Britain—Further Negotiations—Leeds Convention—First Balance Sheet.

THE NEED FOR A COMMUNIST PARTY

To the most militant socialists in Britain following the First World War, one task seemed to dwarf all others—the pressing need for the establishment of a revolutionary party. Their successes and their failures in the years of the war—the very fact that the war had not been stopped, the triumph of the October Revolution in Russia, the stormy post-war years of Labour struggle, the tumultuous revolutionary events on the Continent—all seemed to them to point to this lesson. They were learning the hard way. But now it seemed to stare them in the face; history it seemed was shouting aloud for a Communist Party.

But organisations, like leaders, are made not born. And they are made, moulded, from existing human material. Those who set out to form a Communist Party in Britain had to forge it out of those organisations, those groups and individuals who had begun to reject reformism, to take a path of struggle, to understand the need for a revolutionary change of society, to study the science of Marxism. And this was, indeed, not an easy task.

Lenin, who had very deeply studied the British working class, always pointed out the especial difficulties in creating a revolutionary organisation with a revolutionary theory and approach in what had been, until now, the centre of world capitalism and world imperialism. No other country in the world except, perhaps, Germany had such mass labour organisations as Great Britain—trade unions, Co-operatives, the Labour Party. But these mass organisations, overwhelmingly working-class in their composition, were still dominated by capitalist ideas.

There were in Britain, too, by the end of the war, a number of socialist parties, groups, societies, national and local, who had rejected reformism and turned to Marxism, and who stood for class struggle and a revolutionary road of advance.

Where active resistance to World War I had been organised, it was they who were generally in the foreground; where the mass struggles developed in the stormy immediate post-war years, again it was such groups or their members who were well to the front.

But with all their courage, activity and areas of mass influence like South Wales and the Clydeside, they remained in most of Britain small in size.

Here was the great contradiction in the post-war British labour movement—great mass organisations without socialism, small socialist groups without the masses. How could the marriage be made between socialist ideas, Marxist understanding, and the mass of the British working class? This was the problem facing those who set out to form a Communist Party in Britain.

It was not easy in the centre of world imperialism to come to Marxism. On the one hand, on the soil of imperialism, corruption had entered the very bones of the labour movement. Though weakened somewhat by the war and the stormy days that followed it, reformism was still very strong and influential, and reformists sat in all the key positions of the mass labour organisations. Even among many militant workers, who fought capitalism *in fact* in their factory, pit or depot, who hated capitalism, who wanted socialism, there was a deep belief that this socialism could be achieved by small continuous reforms within the framework of capitalism. Opportunism, the sacrifice of the long-term interests of the working class to some immediate gain, the sacrifice of the interests of the working class as a whole to the interest of a part of it, was deeply based in the British labour movement, not only in corrupt and betraying leaders but in the minds of the workers themselves.

And from this stemmed a second problem. Militant British workers who had come by their own experience to hate and reject the corruption, the opportunism, the policies of the reformist leaders, when they began to tear themselves away, to separate themselves, from opportunism, very easily could, as it were, tear themselves out by the roots from the labour movement, and in their revolutionary disgust isolate themselves from the mass of the workers still under opportunist influence. Mass organisations dominated by opportunism were opposed

by socialist sects. Sectarianism was the reverse side of opportunism, born of it and against it, but often aiding it unawares.

Some revolutionary workers, hating with their very guts the typical Labour M.P., seeing, again and again, men they had sent with their efforts, pennies, votes to a Council or to Parliament, caressed and corrupted by all the cunning and subtlety of British capitalism, forgetting the class they had come from, and the cause for which they were supposed to fight, came to see Parliament itself as a principal cause of corruption, and to adopt a strong and rigid anti-parliamentarian line. When one remembers how the general run of Labour M.Ps. in the 1906-1914 period had served as a tail of the Liberal Party in Parliament, and during the 1914-1918 war as recruiting agent, it is not difficult to understand why.

Some, boiling with indignation at generations of right-wing trade union leaders, who had found a comfortable niche within "the system", helping the Government and capitalist state, and denouncing the militants as "reds", "agitators", etc., came to see the official unions as their enemies, wanted to quit them, and replace them by revolutionary industrial unions, shop stewards' and workers' committees, which had shown their strength in the war.

Some, putting all their hopes, correctly enough, in social revolution, and all their efforts into spreading the Gospel of Socialism, through their disgust with the typical reformists, saw the immediate struggles, on wages, hours, rents and social services, as a "patching up of capitalism", a diversion from the struggle, and saw the revolutionary struggle *in opposition* to the struggle on immediate demands.

Some, filled with disgust at the record of the leaders of the Labour Party and Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) and even of Hyndman and some other leaders of the British Socialist Party, began to see all parties as a form of trick and corruption, and see the way forward in the industrial struggle alone.

Those who set out to form a Communist Party in Britain found, therefore, in the revolutionary groups and organisations all sorts of differing approaches, differing tactics, differing weaknesses, left wing and right wing, reformist and sectarian. That is why the best part of two years of difficult negotiations were necessary to form the Party, from the first initial sounding in 1918, through the London Unity Convention of July 31-August 1, 1920 to the Leeds Convention at the end of January 1921.

The Socialist Organisations

A number of different socialist groups and organisations were involved in the preparatory negotiations to found the Communist Party.

First, the oldest, largest and most important was the *British Socialist Party* (B.S.P.). The B.S.P. was the direct descendant of the Social-Democratic Federation (S.D.F.) founded in 1883 (or more strictly in 1881 as the Democratic Federation), renamed Social-Democratic Party (S.D.P.) in 1908, and enlarged with some left members of the Independent Labour Party and some local socialist clubs and organisations to become, in 1911, the British Socialist Party.

The Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.) had been one of the original constituents of the Labour Representation Committee (L.R.C.) on its foundation in 1900 (the L.R.C. was to be rechristened the Labour Party in 1906) and had a seat reserved on its Executive of nine. It quickly (and quite incorrectly) seceded from the L.R.C., and it was only in 1914 after much discussion, that the British Socialist Party, heir to the S.D.F., decided to reaffiliate to the Labour Party, becoming a member in 1916. The B.S.P. had been a constituent,¹ too, of the Second International with a seat on its International Bureau.

Divided on its attitude to the war, the consistent internationalists, opposing the war as imperialist and reactionary, had defeated Hyndman and the majority of the old pro-war Executive at the 1916 Conference, and henceforth, with their organ *The Call*, carried out a continuous anti-war struggle.

The B.S.P. played a leading role in the "Hands off Russia" campaign, and decided, by an overwhelming majority, to affiliate to the Third (Communist) International within a few months of its constitution in 1919.

Above all, in the almost 40 years of its existence it had educated, developed, and given to the working-class movement a succession of outstanding working-class leaders, and, though sometimes in a somewhat narrow and doctrinaire form, kept alive the heritage of Marxist thought, challenging the pervading reformism.

Lenin recognised the role of the best leaders of the B.S.P. when writing in September 1913 on the death of one of the most active of them—Harry Quelch:²

"Quelch was in the front ranks of those who fought steadfastly and with conviction against opportunism and a liberal-labour policy

¹ At first, of course, as S.D.F.

² Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 19, pp. 370-371, Lawrence and Wishart, 1963.

in the British working-class movement. True, isolation from the masses sometimes infected the British Social-Democrats with a certain sectarianism. Hyndman, the leader and founder of Social-democracy in Britain, has even slipped into jingoism. But the Party of the Social Democrats¹ has fought him on this, and over the whole of Britain the Social-Democrats, and they *alone*, have for decades been carrying on systematic propaganda and agitation in the Marxist spirit. This is the great historical service rendered by Quelch and his comrades."

Organisationally the B.S.P. was weak, a loose federation of clubs and branches rather than a centralised, disciplined Party. Of the 6,000 or so claimed in 1920, many were members on paper only. It was more a propagandist than an agitating, campaigning body, and often rather isolated from the mass of the workers.

Amongst its leaders in 1918-1920 were Albert Inkpin (Secretary) and J. F. Hodgson who played a leading part in the unity negotiations, A. A. Watts (Treasurer), Fred Willis. John MacLean of the great Clyde battles had broken his association with the B.S.P. by 1919. William Gallacher, though a member, was much more involved in and identified with the shop stewards movement on the Clyde. Harry Pollitt was a young member, gaining a growing reputation as a courageous fighter, eloquent speaker, and propagandist for socialism. Theodore Rothstein, who had spent years in Britain as a refugee from Tsarism, and had played an important part fighting for a Marxist understanding in the B.S.P. and for internationalism, was a moving force in the whole unity negotiations. He remained in Britain throughout the first part of the negotiations and returned to his homeland after the Unity Convention of July-August 1920.²

It was the B.S.P. that was the principal initiator, the most steady and patient negotiator for the foundation of the Communist Party, and its members formed the majority of the new Party once established.

The Socialist Labour Party (S.L.P.) arose as a split off from the S.D.F.

¹ Lenin is referring here to the B.S.P.

² It was Theodore Rothstein who initiated the joint translation and publication by the B.S.P. and S.L.P. of Lenin's *State and Revolution*, the ideological effect of which was extremely important during the period from the autumn of 1918, and helped to clear the way for communist unity.

In fact Theodore Rothstein only left on a visit to Soviet Russia in the autumn of 1920. The Foreign Office discovering that he had never formally been "naturalised", thought to play a clever trick by refusing him re-entry into Britain. Lenin, however, sent him to be Soviet Ambassador in Teheran.

at the beginning of the twentieth century. A group of Scottish members of the S.D.F., led by George Yates, an engineering worker, strongly criticised the S.D.F. leadership for supporting, at the 1900 Paris Conference of the Second International, the entry of the French right-wing socialist Millerand into the French bourgeois Cabinet.

They opened up a general attack on the leaders of the S.D.F., accusing them of reformism, and began to publish their attacks in the New York *Weekly People*, organ of the Socialist Labor Party of America, led by Daniel de Leon. Later in 1902, the group began to publish in Scotland their own paper *The Socialist*. Denounced by the S.D.F. leaders as "Impossibilists" (a term used by the French right-wing socialists against the left group of Guesde), denouncing them in their turn as "kangaroos" (springing from reform to reform) they were expelled from the S.D.F. at its 1903 Annual Conference and in August 1903 founded the Socialist Labour Party (S.L.P.) with *The Socialist* as its organ.

De Leonism was the essential intellectual outlook of the S.L.P.—right up to World War I. This was a trend hard to define in a few words. It embodied a mish-mash of ideas ranging from Lassalle to anarchism. It always tended towards the doctrinaire and dogmatic. Preaching that political power must be won by the industrial working class, it correctly criticised the right-wing leadership of the official trade unions. But De Leon always underestimated the capacity of the militant workers to win the majority of the official trade unions and to transform them. He normally thought in terms of creating *alternative* left trade unions. Though he accepted the need for a political party (and in this differed from the syndicalists), he could not see what its role should in practice be in the winning of political power, and his conception of the Party was something of a shadowy phantom.

The British S.L.P. remained in the grip of De Leonism right up to the war, when under the influence of Tom Bell and Arthur MacManus it began in practice to widen its political outlook, but never in fact repudiated De Leonism.

Though divided in its attitude at the beginning of the war, the S.L.P., in the main, took a courageous anti-war stand. With some of its workers in the lead of militant war-time strikes, it spread its influence in the shipyards and machine-shops. It rallied with enthusiasm to the October Revolution and was active in the struggle against British intervention and the campaign for "Hands Off Russia".

The S.L.P. membership was overwhelmingly in Scotland, particularly on the Clyde, with some contacts and small sections in

northern England, especially Yorkshire (in particular Sheffield). Small in size (its Seventeenth Annual Conference in January 1920 claimed 1,250 members of whom just over half were paying dues), it had in Scotland some real mass contact, some leaders with outstanding records as shop stewards in the mass movement, alongside some of outstanding dogmatism.

The S.L.P. was officially Marxist, though some of its Marxism was of a narrow doctrinaire character, that would have shocked the founders of scientific socialism. But it did a job that should not be underestimated, opening the minds of young workers to the study of socialism, organising discussions and classes, and above all through its press. One of the first acts of the S.L.P., after foundation, was to purchase, on the instalment system, a printing machine, and its Edinburgh members, a number of whom were in the printing trade, did all the setting and composing. The press rendered a service to the movement far outside the ranks of its own members. It printed a number of the classics of Marxism including, amongst the first in Britain, works of Lenin. By January 1920, *The Socialist* had a circulation of 8,000.¹

On the issue of Parliament, the S.L.P., like the B.S.P., stood for militant participation, and, from its formation, put up its candidates locally and nationally. But with all its militancy and courage and support for Marxism, the S.L.P. brought to the revolutionary movement in Britain some extreme sectarian trends. There was a tendency to take a negative attitude to the fight on immediate demands, to denounce the official trade unions as nothing but tools of reaction (the S.L.P. constitution forbade its members to hold positions in the official trade unions). Hating corruption like the plague, it tended to fight corruption by withholding its members from what it considered the sources of corruption. Above all its attitude to the Labour Party was unreservedly negative. It opposed contact with and affiliation to the Labour Party as an essential part of its programme. It preached a "purity" of revolutionary doctrine which ended often in wide generalisations and doctrinaire abstractions.

The S.L.P. was, therefore, a combination of positive militant and negative doctrinaire aspects. Its leadership ranged from the wordy sectarianism of dogmatic diehards like Mitchell and Clunie, who only emerged into prominence in their attempts to rally opposition to Communist unity, up to those with strong links with the workers and personal experience of mass struggle like Arthur MacManus, Tom Bell and William Paul, who were to play a leading part in the unity

¹ *Report of 17th Conference of S.L.P.*

negotiations. It was this latter section of the S.L.P., those with mass contact and experience of struggle, who eventually, breaking from the doctrinaire grouping, were to share with the B.S.P. the main honours of founding the Communist Party.

The Workers' Socialist Federation (W.S.F.) which participated throughout the negotiations for a Communist Party, was a very small group based almost exclusively in the East End of London.

It was led, dominated (almost owned) by Sylvia Pankhurst, active and personally extremely courageous leader of the left wing of the pre-war women's suffrage movement. She had the great merit of seeing the need to take the suffrage struggle to the working-class movement. From the Women's Suffrage Federation she developed the Workers' Socialist Federation and developed its organ the *Woman's Dreadnought* into the *Workers' Dreadnought*, which remained under her personal control. The W.S.F. opposed the war, and was extremely active in making known and rallying support for the October Revolution and the young Soviet Republic.

The campaigns and information about the revolutionary developments in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and throughout the world were the great positive contribution of the W.S.F. Many spoke on its platforms (Harry Pollitt for example) and attended its meetings, who were in no way part of its organisation, and the *Workers' Dreadnought*, and some of its pamphlets, had a circulation at the end of the war far outside the ranks of its minute membership. It undoubtedly had a very active influence among working women in the East End of London and a flair for agitation reaching to those, both men and women, who were not politically organised. In time of mass struggle women often have come to the fore in British Labour struggle, and women like Mrs. Walker were genuine "mass agitators" speaking in the language of the people. The *Workers' Dreadnought* was remarkably well informed on international developments of the revolutionary movement in the years that followed the October Revolution.

But the W.S.F., and above all Sylvia Pankhurst herself, typical of those who from outside the working class rallied to the revolutionary movement, brought to the movement an extremist "super-revolutionary" leftist sectarianism, contemptuous almost of the mass organisations of the working class though not, it must be added, of mass activity. The W.S.F. preached anti-parliamentarianism, opposing any form of parliamentary activity. It was categorically opposed to any form of contact with the Labour Party. It despised immediate actions

on partial economic issues and participation in the work of the trade unions. It stood for "pure revolution", for a "straight", "undefiled", "uncompromising", revolutionary advance, without stages, halts, or alliances. It brought, particularly through the personality of Sylvia Pankhurst herself, despite all her energy and courage, an atmosphere of intrigue and "personality" into the unity negotiations.

The role of the W.S.F., with at the most a few hundred members, was therefore of a mixed nature—positive in that it awoke many workers to revolutionary ideas and world revolutionary developments, but negative in its extreme sectarianism and individualistic approaches.

The South Wales Socialist Society (S.W.S.S.) was the fourth continuous participant in the main unity negotiations. The mining valleys of South Wales had long traditions of extremely militant struggle. The S.W.S.S. was descended from the Miners' Reform Movement, a militant opposition to the right-wing trade union leaders that had grown up before the war.

Its trend was somewhat akin to syndicalism, mass revolutionary struggle through revolutionary trade unionism, suspicious of political parties and extremely suspicious of the official trade unions and their leaders.¹

South Wales had been the centre of great strikes and strong anti-war activity of a rather spontaneous nature in the course of the war. The S.W.S.S. was bitterly anti-parliamentarian. It was Marxist, but again, often in rigid doctrinaire form.

Organisationally the S.W.S.S. was extremely weak, in fact a loose federation of local socialist clubs, but behind it stood the deep revolutionary feelings of the Welsh miners, especially in the Rhondda. In fact it ceased to exist, as an organisation, before the unity negotiations were completed, and was replaced by the equally organisationally weak *South Wales Communist Council* (S.W.C.C.). But its organisational weakness should not be allowed to hide the strength of Marxist ideas and militant spirit in the valleys of South Wales, nor the rallying power of the small Marxist clubs and organisations, nor the influence of men like Bill Hewlett of Abertillery who was one of the first fighters in Wales for communist unity.

The S.W.S.S. and S.W.C.C. contributed little to the preparation

¹ The acute tradition of class struggle in the Welsh valleys combined with the belief that the Miners' Federation could become an industrial union and could then do the work of politics as far as that was needed. There was no rejection there of the potentialities of the existing trade unions: and their "syndicalism" was in most cases a mood rather than a doctrine.

of a united Communist Party, but served as a link, a bridge, over to the deeply revolutionary miners and steelworkers, whose feelings were strong and militant, but whose revolutionary temper was as yet little reflected in any stable revolutionary organisations.

Other Participants

A number of other working-class and socialist organisations should here be mentioned which directly or indirectly were involved in the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

First amongst these is the organisation of *Shop Stewards' and Workers Committees*.

Shop stewards (and various shop and factory committees) had existed before the war, particularly in the engineering industry, as part of the normal trade union machinery.

The great period of militant shop steward struggle was in the course of World War I. When the official trade union movement, with all its leaders and machinery, became more and more openly interlinked with and involved in the apparatus of Government and state, not only supporting the war but actively recruiting for it, carrying out for the capitalist Government the measures of dilution of labour, attacking wages, hours and long-established workshop privileges, militant working-class resistance began *from below*—from factory, shipyard, workshop, pit, railway depot, and the organisations that grew and spread in factory and workshop. Shop steward and workshop committees became the new *alternative* leadership of the most militant section of the working class. The shop stewards' and workers' committees began their struggles against the *economic* attacks of capitalism resulting from the war, but inevitably, and particularly in the fight against direction of labour and conscription, they became more and more involved in *political struggle against the war itself*. As the struggle grew and spread, as Government attacks on their movement, with police, batons, arrests, seizure of press and deportation of delegates, became more vicious, the movement became more and more politically militant. Under the influence of the 'October (November by British calendar) Revolution, which the shop stewards greeted warmly, the process deepened, and their leaders, most of whom were members of the different socialist groups and influenced by Marxism, became, rather spontaneously than as a result of deep study, more and more revolutionary.

One great centre of militant shop steward struggle during the war, so

vividly described in W. Gallacher's *Revolt on the Clyde*, was in the shipyards and engineering shops of Scotland, particularly on the Clyde-side. There, in 1915 under Gallacher's leadership a direct product of the struggle, the Clyde Workers' Committee, was founded, later to be enlarged into the Scottish Workers' Committee, with the shop stewards' paper, *The Worker*, edited for a period by J. R. Campbell.

Similar movements, though on a lesser scale, began to develop in other parts of the country, especially in northern England and in towns like London, Sheffield and Newcastle, still mainly in engineering. The Government deportation measures against the leading Scottish shop stewards helped the spread of the movement. Different local shop stewards' and workers' committees began to link up and loosely co-ordinate their work. In 1916 the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement was formed; its objects included "the organisation of the workers upon a class basis to prosecute the interests of the working class until the triumph of the workers is assured". Thus a loose national organisation was established, though the various area committees were more or less autonomous.

Opposing the war, the shop stewards' movement from the very outset hailed and supported the October Revolution and stood for the defence from capitalist intervention of the young Soviet Republic. They greeted the Soviets as a form of workers' organisation akin to their own, though they often did not understand their full significance. In January 1920 a National Conference of Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committees met in London, representing some 72,000 workers, and voted affiliation to the Communist International. A broader rank and file conference, initiated by the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee along with the Scottish and London Workers' Committees, was held in March 1920, and also decided to apply for affiliation to the Communist International.

The shop stewards' movement contained some of the most militant, class-conscious workers from the factories, experienced in struggle, revolutionary in outlook, bitter in their hatred of capitalism and of the corrupting influence of reformism. Within their movement was a diversity of trends. In general they were profoundly suspicious of parliamentary activity, of political parties and their "politicians". "Politicians" were for them the right-wing leaders of the Labour Party whom they had seen with their own eyes playing the role of Government agents and strike-wreckers. They were in general for no truck with the Labour Party, and extremely suspicious of the official

trade unions. They tended to see the future of the working-class movement in the form of workers' committees that would be set up by revolutionary struggle under the leadership of the shop stewards' movement itself, and therefore found it hard, at first, to see the role of a new revolutionary political party.

By 1920 the shop stewards' movement was loosely co-ordinated under the national committee, but with by far the strongest and most deeply based section in Scotland. Amongst the shop stewards' leaders who were to become involved in the formation of the Communist Party were W. Gallacher, David Ramsay, J. T. Murphy, E. Lismer.

The shop stewards' and workers' committees in the factories were broad committees grouping workers of every outlook. The shop stewards' movement by its very nature could not become part of, or be merged into the new Communist Party. But the shop stewards' struggle was the source and training ground for many of the best British revolutionaries, and from its leaders, despite reservations on the character of a revolutionary party, came a powerful contribution towards revolutionary unity.

Involved in different ways and differing degrees in the complex process of forming the Communist Party were a number of small groups and organisations.

In 1920 on the staff of the *Daily Herald*, then still an organ of the left with a good record of struggle against the war, were a number of men and women who actively supported the negotiations. A number of *Herald Leagues* in different localities were drawn into the preparation of the Communist Party.¹

Involved, too, were a small group of left-wing Guild Socialists who renamed themselves the *Guild Communists* before merging into the Party. From the National Guilds League had developed during the war a group of Guild Socialists led by G. D. H. Cole, mostly university and professional people, who stood for a type of "respectable" syndicalism, with the country led by guilds representative of the various industries. From these a small group turned towards Marxism, split off from the Guild Socialists, and rallied to the Communist Party.

Amongst those associated with this group were Robin Page Arnot, Walter Holmes, William Mellor, W. N. Ewer and Ellen Wilkinson.

There were a number of progressive people in the "Hands off

¹ It is sometimes difficult to appreciate how important a political role was played by the militant journals and newspapers, in those days when the left parties were still "unorganised".

Russia" Committees up and down the country who started unattached to any political party, but who, through their activity in defence of Soviet Russia from capitalist attack, came towards an understanding of and sympathy for communism. Some of them participated locally in the work for communist unity and joined the Communist Party when it was formed. Both Tom Wintringham and Ralph Fox, for example, came towards communism in this way.

Up and down the country there were a number of local socialist and revolutionary clubs and societies, some quite influential, that came to understand the need for a united party. *The Socialist Prohibition Fellowship*, led by the Scottish socialist Bob Stewart who had spent years in gaol for resistance to the war, joined in the preparation for the Party.

Lastly, within the *Independent Labour Party* (I.L.P.) there was a left-wing group drawn towards Marxism, inspired by the October Revolution, who came to see the need to break with reformism, secede from the Second International, affiliate to the Communist International, and form, in Britain, a united Communist Party.

The I.L.P. in 1920 was numerically the largest of the socialist parties. Its official membership in February 1920 was 37,150 with 787 branches.¹

Founded in 1893 as a socialist body, with special emphasis on the independent representation of labour in the House of Commons, the I.L.P. had been the driving force in the formation of the L.R.C. and Labour Party, and the largest socialist body affiliated to the L.R.C. on its foundation in 1900.

Many militant workers who had no knowledge of Marxism, and who were just coming to see socialism as an alternative to capitalism but had as yet no understanding of the science of socialism, came to the I.L.P. which formed strong roots, especially in Scotland and the north of England (Lancashire, Yorkshire). But though Engels played an important part in its formation and gave it initial support, and though Tom Mann was one of its earliest General Secretaries, the Marxists tended to remain outside it, and most of the I.L.P. leaders ignored or rejected Marxism, though in some local branches there was a strong Marxist influence.

Prevailing among the workers in the I.L.P. was a type of "sentimental socialism", a hatred of capitalism and all it stood for, a deep desire for and faith in the socialist future, an instinctive spontaneous feeling rather than a scientific outlook. Men like Keir Hardie ignored

¹ *Report of 29th Annual Conference of the I.L.P., March 1921.*

Marxism and rejected the class struggle in theory, even when they carried it out in practice. And thus deprived of a real socialist understanding, a real scientific approach, and a recognition of the necessity for the revolutionary defeat of capitalism, the I.L.P. became a happy hunting ground, an easy prey for the right-wing reformists, like Ramsay MacDonald, who rapidly came to dominate the Party and to secure the key positions in the leadership.

In the course of the war the I.L.P., at first divided, had come to take an anti-war position, not revolutionary in character, but of a pacifist type of individual resistance. Many workers seeing no other possible type of struggle against the war rallied to the I.L.P. in this period, and along with them a number of Quakers, middle-class pacifists, and dissident Liberals.

At the end of the war, while the right-wing leadership attacked and maligned the October Revolution and the Soviet Union and did its best to stifle the militant feeling and actions of the working class, there was strong pressure from the rank and file to break with the Second International and all it stood for, and a strong demand from below for affiliation to the Third (Communist) International.

Forced to yield a little to this pressure, the leadership accepted withdrawal from the Second International but refused affiliation to the Communist International (and later sought to divert the militant workers by aiding other Centrist groups on the Continent in the formation of a "mid-way", "Two-and-a-Half" International).

In 1919-1920 a number of left-wing members of the I.L.P. who had come towards a Marxist approach opposed the reformist leadership, demanded affiliation to the Third International, and, seeing the need for a single revolutionary party, organised themselves loosely into a "Left-Wing Committee", which at the end of 1920 and early 1921 put out a small paper—*The International*.

They kept in contact personally with those who were negotiating the formation of the Communist Party, but saw their main immediate task as the fight inside the I.L.P. to win as many as possible of its members towards a revolutionary position.

Amongst the leaders of this left trend were Emile Burns, R. Palme Dutt,¹ E. H. Brown, Shapurji Saklatvala, Helen Crawford, J. R. Wilson and J. Walton Newbold.

Thus while the I.L.P. officially rejected Marxism, and, despite the left

¹ R. Palme Dutt remained in this group but also became a member of the Communist Party at its first Unity Convention.

phrases it adopted under the pressure of its rank and file, maintained its reformist positions while it did its best to divert militant workers from taking the path of the Communist International and lost no opportunity to snipe at the young Soviet Republic, there was a left group within the I.L.P. who rejected these positions, took up a revolutionary position and, eventually, early in 1921, came over to the Communist Party.

Such were the main parties and groups, attitudes and trends out of which unity had to be achieved and a Communist Party established.

Those in the leadership of these groups were almost all united by a deep revolutionary feeling, a profound hatred of capitalism, a deep disgust with reformism and the old reformist leadership, its corruption and repeated betrayal. They were all alike inspired with a tremendous feeling of enthusiasm for the victory of October and the first steps of the Soviet Government, Communist Party and people in building socialism. They were ready to do all that they could to resist the efforts of British and world capitalism to destroy by armed intervention the Soviet Republic. They had rallied to Marxism, but many of them had hardly begun to study it, or approached it in a narrow dogmatic way. They saw, but not yet with great clarity, the need to merge their separate forces, to form a new type of revolutionary Communist Party. They could see that without such a Party there could be no successful advance to socialism in Britain.

But amongst them were many different approaches, different confusions, different backgrounds in different sectors of the Labour Movement, different loyalties to their own particular group, personal differences; inevitably there were a few whose revolutionary attitude was skin deep, because at that time revolution was "in the air"; and there were just a few who thought they could enjoy the glories of revolutionary success without the patience and sacrifice, the setbacks and defeats, the struggle and sweat, needed for socialist victory in any country, but above all in the country that had so long been at the centre of world imperialism.

It is not, therefore, surprising, that the preparations and negotiations for the formation of the Communist Party were prolonged and complicated.

THE FIRST SOUNDINGS

The first tentative soundings on the question of socialist unity took the form of meetings and discussions between the B.S.P., S.L.P. and I.L.P.

For reasons quite other than revolutionary the existence of several separate socialist parties in Britain had been a source of embarrassment to the leaders of the Second International, and they had made, already before the war, some first attempts to bring about a formal unity.

In 1913, on the insistence of the International Socialist Bureau, a Socialist Unity Conference was held of three of its affiliated bodies—B.S.P., I.L.P. and Fabian Society, where it was agreed to set up a council for joint activity. Little was done by this council, and its work, in any case, was abruptly brought to an end by the outbreak of the world war, and the deep divisions on the nature of the war which ran both between and within the different socialist bodies.¹

The Fifth Annual Conference of the B.S.P. in 1916 recommended the reopening of unity negotiations, and in August of that year a meeting was held between B.S.P. and I.L.P. representatives. There it was agreed to form a United Socialist Council with three representatives from each of the two organisations, and three empty places kept open for the absent Fabians, who had refused to attend.²

The following year, at its Sixth Annual Conference (April 8-9, 1917), the B.S.P. welcomed the formation of this Council and expressed "the hope that such co-operation will conduce to the eventual unification of the socialist forces in Britain."³

During the next twelve months the United Socialist Council met on several occasions, took the initiative in convening the June 1917 Leeds Convention,⁴ discussed a joint delegation to Soviet Russia, but made no advance on the question of socialist unity.

At its next, seventh, Annual Conference (March 31-April 1, 1918), the B.S.P. returned to the question, and a resolution moved by the Openshaw Branch calling for "the co-operation of all active socialist forces with a view to formulating a common working basis", and for new and extended approaches, was overwhelmingly carried by 89 to 2 votes.⁵

¹ R. Page Arnot, "Birth of a Party" (unpublished MS.). Note too that its activities, such as the organisation of education classes, continued in the first years of the war.

² *Report of 5th Annual Conference of the B.S.P.*, 1916.

³ *Report of 6th Annual Conference of B.S.P.*, April 8-9, 1917.

⁴ The Leeds Convention of June 3, 1917, was attended by 1,150 delegates. It was held to discuss, celebrate, and support the February (March by British calendar) 1917 Russian Revolution. Delegates ranged from militant left to extreme right. (*What Happened at Leeds*, Report published by the Council of Workers' and Soldiers Delegates, London 1917.)

⁵ *Report of 7th Annual Conference of B.S.P.*, March 31-April 1, 1918.

In the discussion of this resolution there was a new and important element. Some of the delegates stressed that socialist unity could only have a meaning if it was *unity on the basis of Marxism*. The October Revolution had not only stirred up enthusiasm but it had stirred up the minds of the delegates to consider the type of party which had led to the triumph of October. Whilst there was general agreement amongst the delegates that any future unity negotiations should involve the S.L.P., doubt was now expressed by some as to the utility and advisability of continuing negotiations with the I.L.P.¹ The issue was, in fact, left over, but the point had now been made.²

The resolution of this Conference was duly despatched to the I.L.P. and S.L.P. Both organisations agreed to a Joint Conference. The first contacts led to a meeting early in December 1918, where the different organisations agreed to set out in writing their respective tactical programmes, and fixed a further meeting early in the following year.³ This took place on March 6, 1919, with Philip Snowden in the chair and little progress except for agreement for a further meeting and a superbly foggy resolution of Ramsay MacDonald type:

“that this Conference expresses its agreement on the stated objective being the social ownership and control of the means and implements of production, and that we have made progress in discussing the necessary structure for building up the psychology and means of obtaining that objective.”⁴

With such pristine clarity of purpose they reassembled a fortnight later (March 19, 1919), again with Snowden in the chair. While it was accepted that the three organisations should jointly approach the Labour Party to call a Convention for action against British intervention in Soviet Russia, on the question at issue—socialist unity—the only agreement was that divergencies were so great that agreement was impossible and that there was therefore no utility in convening further meetings to discuss unification.⁵ The meeting was the scene of a hot debate on fundamental issues of reformism versus revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat, involving, above all, Arthur MacManus and Philip Snowden.

¹ *Report of 7th Annual Conference of B.S.P., March 31–April 1, 1918.*

² One of the reasons for the bringing of the S.L.P. into the negotiations was the effect of the October Revolution on the content of *The Socialist*, which now began to have an increasing workshop circulation.

³ *Report of 8th Annual Conference of B.S.P., April 20–21, 1919.*

⁴ *Ibid.* ⁵ *Ibid.*

The I.L.P. leaders were bitterly opposed to developments in the Soviet Union, they stood for the gradual transformation of capitalism by successive reforms brought about by parliamentary and council action within the framework of capitalism. For them the capitalist state tended to be "democracy" and the rule of the working class "dictatorship". However much the pressure of events of the war and turmoil of post-war struggles had forced them to "leften" a little their language, their fundamental approach was still classic reformism. "It is no use", declared Snowden, at the end of the meeting. "You are asking us to give up all the things we have stood for for the last thirty years."¹

March 1919, therefore, represented the close of the first phase of the unity negotiations. Although they did not result in any organisational advance to unity, the fact that this phase revealed the fundamentally reformist position of the I.L.P., and that there was no place for it, as an organisation, in a united revolutionary party, meant, in fact, a distinct step forward.

What is the significance of this stage?

Firstly, that there was a growing demand at the end of the war for some form of united socialist organisation in Britain. Secondly, that the process of negotiation for such unity was begun. Thirdly, that through the experience of discussion with the I.L.P. leaders and of their efforts to muffle and stifle the militant developments in the British labour movement, it became clear that formal socialist unity with the I.L.P. was not only impossible but undesirable. Fourthly, that the October Revolution showed that the way to the victory of socialism was a decisive break with reformism, that the new Party to fulfil its tasks must be based on Marxism. Fifthly, that this meant in fact unity between the revolutionary and Marxist groups, and that the stage was set for the next phase of unity negotiations.

March 1919, too, was the month of the foundation of the Third (Communist) International. Though reports of this event took time to reach Britain, it helped to speed up the understanding, which experience in Britain had already taught the most militant leaders of the British socialist groups, that a complete break with reformism was essential, that what was needed was a revolutionary party based on Marxism.

¹ Tom Bell, *The British Communist Party*, p. 52.

UNITY NEGOTIATIONS—SECOND STAGE, MARCH
1919—MAY 1920

On May 13, 1919, the first unity meeting was held in London between representatives of the B.S.P., S.L.P., W.S.F., and S.W.S.S. to discuss the formation in Britain of a single united Communist Party.¹

On the really fundamental issues there was virtually no disagreement. All accepted affiliation to the Communist International. All rejected class-collaboration and reformism. All stood for revolutionary struggle, the overthrow of capitalism, the winning of political power by the working class, the establishment of the dictatorship of the working class to replace the present rule (dictatorship) of the capitalists. All supported Soviets or Workers' Councils as the type of organisation that could both fight for and establish political power and represent the democratic rule of the majority, the working class and its allies.

But as soon as discussions passed on from fundamental strategy to tactical questions, difficulties began.

What should the attitude be to parliamentary action? Should the new party, once formed, work to get its representatives elected to Parliament? How should they work if elected?

Both the B.S.P. and the S.L.P. stood for, and in practice carried out, parliamentary activity and fought to send their representatives both to local councils and the House of Commons. But the W.S.F. and S.W.S.S. strongly opposed parliamentary activity, considered it an impermissible compromise that would open them up inevitably to capitalist corruption.

What should be the attitude of the new party to the Labour Party? Should it or should it not apply for affiliation?

The B.S.P., itself affiliated, strongly demanded that the new party should apply for affiliation. Its representatives quoted the referendum of 1918 that had shown a four to one majority for maintaining affiliation, and the large majority for this at their 1919 Conference. They quoted their own experiences of freedom as affiliated members to criticise reformism and the Labour Party leaders. Against this all the other three organisations stood unreservedly against any relations whatsoever with the Labour Party, including affiliation.

Discussion went to and fro, always to impasse, until a proposal was

¹ *Report of 9th Annual Conference of B.S.P.*, April 4-5, 1920; *The Call*, August 21, 1919; *ibid.*, February 12, 1920; *Workers' Dreadnought*, February 21, 1920; *The Socialist*, July 10, 1919; *Report of S.L.P. Unity Committee—Forward to a Communist Party* (4 pp. folder).

made that the membership of all four organisations should be consulted as to their willingness to merge their respective bodies into a united party, with the question of affiliation to the Labour Party to be settled by a referendum of the membership of the new party three months after its formation. A resolution to this effect was put and accepted by the negotiators and it was agreed that they should each put the proposal by referendum to their membership.

The B.S.P. Executive discussed the position at its August meeting (August 16-17, 1919) and supported its representatives' position. Two ballots of branches were set going, one at the end of the year on affiliation to the Communist International, carried by 98 to 4,¹ and one early in 1920 on the proposals for unification, carried by an overwhelming majority.²

The S.L.P. also carried out a referendum early in 1920. But the S.L.P. carried it out in such a way that rejection was inevitable. Instead of a single question—are you in favour of a merger, with a referendum of membership on affiliation three months after the merger—they divided the question into two parts with a separate vote on each, with the inevitable result that there was a large majority *for* a merger, and another large majority against a referendum on affiliation to the Labour Party. The more dogmatic section of the S.L.P. leadership were not only dead set against unification except on their own terms, they had become extremely suspicious of *their own* representatives on the Unity Committee (Tom Bell, Arthur MacManus and William Paul) who, whatever their personal views on affiliation, were experienced militants, genuinely desirous of unity, and clear that some compromise would be necessary in the interests of unity. The leadership, therefore, by a small majority dissolved *its own* Unity Committee.³

The W.S.F. had accepted the proposals for a referendum but organised an extremely complicated ballot in several sections which committed them, as before, *for* unity, but *against* parliamentary action and Labour Party affiliation.⁴

The S.W.S.S. was not in an organisational position to hold a ballot, and early in 1920 almost ceased to exist as an organised group.

With the opening of the New Year of 1920 the situation seemed black, and prospects gloomy. Two meetings of the Unity Committee

¹ *The Call*, October 9, 1919.

² *Report of 9th Annual Conference of B.S.P.*, April 4-5, 1920.

³ *Manifesto on Communist Unity of Communist Unity Group of S.L.P.*, April 1920.

⁴ *Workers' Dreadnought*, December 21, 1920.

were held in January (January 8 and January 24, 1920); the first, attended by B.S.P., W.S.F., S.W.S.S. but not the S.L.P., yielded nothing; the second, by B.S.P., W.S.F., S.W.S.S. and (unofficially) by Bell, MacManus and Paul, was again adjourned without result.¹

The Executive Committee of the B.S.P. (February 14-15, 1920), seeing the impasse and trying to break it, expressed its willingness to withdraw the proposal for a referendum on affiliation three months after the foundation of the new party, provided that freedom was given in that party to advance the idea of affiliation, that its branches should have the right locally to decide their relations with the Labour Party and that the opinion of the Communist International should be asked.²

By this time a further complication had developed with the formation in Amsterdam of a West European Committee of the Communist International under the leadership of a Dutch communist. This Committee, exceeding its authority, began at the beginning of 1920 to call conferences and issue statements in the name of the C.I. and, in conjunction with certain leftist groups from Germany and other countries, took up a leftist position, deciding, amongst other things, against affiliation to the Labour Party. One of its meetings was attended, in February 1920, by delegates of the B.S.P., S.L.P. and W.S.F. In March it issued a call to the British workers. The S.L.P. and W.S.F., therefore, were able to support their positions by claiming the authority of the International and did not hesitate to do so. The B.S.P. stoutly stuck to its position, stating that it did not accept the Amsterdam position as the official view of the Communist International and that even if this were the view it would be nevertheless incorrect.³ On this *The Call*, for instance, was quite emphatic and quite unawed by the "big names" of Amsterdam.

By mid-February 1920, deadlock was reached. The official S.L.P. leadership was rejecting every form of concession, attacking the B.S.P. in the columns of *The Socialist*, and declaring that it stood "firmly on the bedrock of no compromise . . ." (*The Socialist*, February 19, 1920). Not to be outdone, Sylvia Pankhurst in the *Workers' Dreadnought* was preaching revolutionary "purity":

"The Communist Party must keep its doctrine pure, and its

¹ *The Call*, February 12, 1920; *Workers' Dreadnought*, February 21, 1920.

² *The Call*, March 4, 1920; *Report of 9th Annual Conference of B.S.P.*, April 4-5, 1920.

³ *Workers' Dreadnought*, March 20, 1920; *The Call*, February 11, 1920; *Report of 9th Annual Conference of B.S.P.*, April 4-5, 1920.

independence of Reformism inviolate; its mission is to lead the way, without stopping or turning, by the direct road to the Communist Revolution."¹

March, too, was a month of deadlock. On March 13, 1920, all four organisations were represented at the meeting of the Unity Committee, the S.L.P. this time by its official delegates, who declared that even if the B.S.P. waived altogether the issue of affiliation, a merger would still be opposed.²

But by now there was a new and more promising factor. It was now clear that the old doctrinaire majority in the leadership of the S.L.P. were utterly intractable on the issue of unity and determined to remain in their own utter isolation. The active members of the S.L.P., particularly those who were steeped in the mass movement, and of these particularly MacManus, Bell and Paul who had participated in the unity negotiations and had now been repudiated, saw that in the interest of the revolutionary movement a break would have to be made. They prepared, therefore, to call on all genuine revolutionaries in their own party to support the carrying through of the unity discussions to a successful conclusion, and they convened them to an unofficial Unity Conference to be held in Nottingham at the beginning of April.³

With April 1920 the position began to improve. While in the first days of the month (April 3-4) the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the official S.L.P. remained aloof, dogmatic and remote,⁴ on the same days all the most active and capable of the leaders and protagonists of the S.L.P., representing the big majority of the active membership, attended the unofficial Unity Conference in Nottingham, and issued a *Manifesto on Communist Unity* that clearly recognised the need for a united revolutionary force. The task, it declared, was:

"to create this force by unity of all elements scattered throughout the various groups and Parties as the first essential to the formation of a Communist Party in Britain."

Amongst the twenty-two signatories of the Manifesto were Arthur MacManus, Tom Bell, William Paul, W. J. Hewlett (Abertillery),

¹ *Workers' Dreadnought*, February 21, 1920, p. 6.

² *The Call*, April 1, 1920; *The Socialist*, March 25, 1920; *Workers' Dreadnought*, March 20, 1920.

³ *Manifesto on Communist Unity of Communist Unity Group* (4 pp. printed folder, April 1920).

⁴ *Report of 17th Conference of S.L.P.*, April 3-4, 1920.

W. Gee (Coventry), T. A. Jackson (Newcastle-on-Tyne) and Bob Stewart (Dundee).¹

At the same time (April 4-5) the Ninth Annual Conference of the B.S.P., having heard a report of the unity discussions to date, adopted by 82 to 4 a resolution pledging itself "not to permit any more points of detail or tactics to stand in the way of the complete unification of the left-wing organisations in a United Communist Party" and instructed its Executive Committee "to proceed with the endeavour to carry the Unity negotiations to a successful conclusion".²

On April 24 a further Unity Conference was attended by representatives of the B.S.P., W.S.F., S.W.S.S. and Communist Unity Group (C.U.G.), the name adopted by those of the S.L.P. headed by MacManus and Bell who had made the break and, at Nottingham, committed themselves fully to unity. There was no agreement yet but the atmosphere was changing.³ Several compromises were discussed and the meeting adjourned. Resuming on May 9, with the B.S.P., C.U.G., and W.S.F. representatives in attendance (the S.W.S.S. had by now ceased to exist as an organisation), there was general agreement that the various tactical differences should be decided *at the Unity Convention itself*.⁴ On May 29, though the W.S.F. was hesitating, the B.S.P. and C.U.G. delegates came to a definite agreement *to call the Unity Convention for the beginning of August*.

The Convention would have the definite purpose of establishing the Communist Party. All organisations, branches of organisations, groups and local societies that accepted the three fundamental principles of affiliation to the Communist International, dictatorship of the proletariat, and Soviets would be invited to send representatives. Organisations and individuals participating were to pledge themselves to accept the Convention decisions. The Convention itself would decide on the question of affiliation to the Labour Party. Meanwhile, special committees were set up to take the necessary organisational measures.⁵

The situation was also clarifying on the international front. The B.S.P. had rejected the positions of the Amsterdam Committee, but now the news was received that this Committee had been dissolved by the Communist International.⁶

¹ *Manifesto on Communist Unity*.

² *Report of 9th Annual Conference of the B.S.P.*, April 4-5, 1920. ³ *The Call*, May 6, 1920.

⁴ *The Call*, May 13, 1920; *Workers' Dreadnought*, May 15, 1920.

⁵ *The Call*, June 3 and June 10, 1920.

⁶ *The Call*, May 13 and May 20, 1920. *Verbatim Report of Second Congress of Communist International* (in Russian) Moscow, 1934, pp. 609-611.

The two main participants had agreed. Nothing could now stand in the way of the Unity Convention.¹

Preparing the Unity Convention

June 1920, was a month of hard organisational work, preparing invitations, agenda, draft resolutions, contacting organisations and societies all over the country. A Joint Provisional Committee had been set up to make the final preparations, consisting of J. F. Hodgson, A. A. Watts and Fred Willis from the B.S.P., Tom Bell, Arthur MacManus and W. Paul from the C.U.G., with MacManus as Chairman and Albert Inkpin as Secretary. The W.S.F. from the beginning of June had broken away from the Unity Committee and become definitely hostile. The *South Wales Communist Council* with eight groups in South Wales replaced, in July, the S.W.S.S. and sent its representative on to the Provisional Committee.²

On July 7, 1920, the official invitation to the Unity Convention was issued accompanied by a *Call for a Communist Party* addressed "To the Communists and Socialists of Great Britain."³ *The Call* pointed to the example of the workers of Soviet Russia in carrying through the social revolution:

"In Russia the working class has rallied nobly to its clarion call, and socialism there is seen in action, no longer in the club rooms and coffee houses, but in actual struggle, braving torture and death itself in a glorious effort to preserve the results of the first definite and permanent breach in the wall of international imperialism . . . the Russian Revolution becomes the touchstone of International Socialism, a veritable beacon light vindicating the paths to follow and the course to pursue."

It pointed to the efforts of capitalism all over the world to destroy the young Soviet Republic. It attacked the long-standing and deeply-

¹ In view of the complex problems that were involved in bringing about a formal merger of the different Marxist groups, it is perhaps interesting to note here that another possibility had been under discussion between some individual Marxists for establishing provisional Committees on a national and local basis for the foundation of a united party and merging the old groups and sects *into* this new united party. R. Palme Dutt writes of this in his contribution "Theodore Rothstein—Marxist and Fighter against Imperialism" in *Imperialism and the Struggle of the Working Class*—a collection (in Russian) of essays in memory of Theodore Rothstein, published by the Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R., Moscow, 1960.

² W. J. Hewlett of Abertillery. *The Call*, July 5, 1920.

³ *Call for a Communist Party: To the Communists and Socialists of Great Britain*, printed folder, July 8, 1920.

entrenched ideas of reformism. The great need in Britain, it declared, is a Communist Party of which the essential principles would be:

“(a) Communism as against capitalism, . . .

“(b) The Soviet idea as against parliamentary democracy, i.e. a structure making provision for the participation in social administration only of those who render useful service to the community.

“(c) The dictatorship of the proletariat.

“Learning from history that dominant classes never yield to the revolutionary enslaved class without a struggle, the Communists must be prepared to meet and crush all the efforts of capitalist reactionaries to regain their lost privileges pending a system of thoroughgoing Communism. In other words, the Communist Party must stand for the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The Call recognised that the different socialist parties and groups had legitimate claims and achievements, but stressed that the outstanding need was a single *united* revolutionary party. If you agree with the main principles, it declared, send your delegates to the Convention. Lenin himself, it stated, replying to a question from a member of the recent British Labour delegation to Russia, had replied that “genuine partisans of the liberation of the workers from the yoke of capital cannot possibly oppose the foundation of a Communist Party that alone is able to educate the working masses”.

On July 8, Lenin had, in fact, written a letter to the Joint Provisional Committee greeting the Unity Convention and putting his own view in favour of parliamentary activity and affiliation to the Labour Party, but it was received only a few days before the Convention.¹ Lenin's general approach, however, became known in the course of July, though the text of his *Left-Wing Communism* was not yet published.

While all the detailed preparations were moving ahead for the Convention some last minute efforts to prevent its success were being made. The official S.L.P. was fulminating through its journal against the Unity Convention, having expelled all those who had joined with the C.U.G. The W.S.F. in June broke completely with the Unity Committee and sent out an appeal for a counter-conference of all those opposing parliamentary action and affiliation to the Labour Party, to be held on June 19, ostensibly to decide whether or not to support the

¹ *The Call*, July 22, 1920.

Unity Convention, but in fact to prepare an alternative organisation.¹

On June 19, this Conference was held in London with the normal W.S.F. supporters and a very few anti-parliamentarian groups from outside and decided to rename itself (without any international authority) the Communist Party (British Section of Third International) or C.P. (B.S.T.I.).² (In fact a year earlier, in June 1919, the W.S.F. had already decided to rename itself the Communist Party, but had been persuaded to postpone the change of name pending unity negotiations). On July 17, the *Workers' Dreadnought* published an "Open Letter to Comrade Lenin" from Sylvia Pankhurst "showing him where he went wrong" on the parliamentary and Labour Party issues, and on the eve of the Unity Convention a further "Open Letter to the Delegates" called on them to rally around her grouplet, and reject the Convention and its decisions.

But these sniping attacks were of very little influence and did little to divert support from the Convention.

On July 29, *The Call* issued its farewell notice:

"With the holding of the Communist Unity Convention in London next Saturday, the B.S.P. will cease its separate existence and its branches and members will be merged in the new Communist Party."³

The Communist Unity Committee issued its last communiqué. The Unity Convention opened on Saturday, July 31. The prolonged, difficult negotiations had ended in success.

COMMUNIST UNITY CONVENTION, JULY 31-AUGUST 1, 1920

The Communist Unity Convention was held in London on July 31 and August 1, 1920. It opened in the rather unusual atmosphere of the Cannon Street Hotel on the bounds of the City of London, a hall more accustomed to City dignitaries, and transferred, on the Sunday, to the more crowded but more familiar International Socialist Club in the East Road, long a traditional meeting place of the socialist clubs.⁴

Some 160 delegates attended with 211 mandates.⁵ Of these 96 repre-

¹ *Workers' Dreadnought*, June 12, 1920.

² *Workers' Dreadnought*, June 26, 1920.

³ *The Call*, July 29, 1920.

⁴ For Unity Convention see: *Official Report of Unity Convention*, published C.P.G.B., September 1920; R. Page Arnot, "Birth of a Party" (unpublished MS.) pp. 27-59; Bob Stewart, "The Foundation of the Communist Party", from *On the Thirteenth Anniversary of the Communist Party*, C.P., October 1950.

⁵ Official report states 152 delegates, but lists 157.

sented B.S.P. branches, 22 represented Communist Unity Groups,¹ one shop stewards' representative, one S.L.P. branch (outside the C.U.G.), five representatives of the Guild Communists, four from the Socialist Prohibition Fellowship, three branches of the Herald League and a number of local socialist clubs and societies.

Albert Inkpin, former Secretary of the B.S.P. and Secretary of the Joint Provisional Committee, opened the Congress formally, and Arthur MacManus, elected to the chair, made the opening address. "After today", he said:

"there would at least exist in Great Britain a reliable, rigid, straight and determined Communist Party."

Following the acceptance of the detailed report of the long unity negotiations that had preceded the Convention, fraternal messages were read from different parties and individuals. Greetings came from the German Communist Party, with a special personal message from the veteran socialist Clara Zetkin, from the Communist Parties of Holland, Austria, Switzerland, from the Hungarian Communists, from the Lithuanian Communist Federation, from the Norwegian Labour Party and the Italian Socialist Party. There were messages from Tom Mann and from the left-wing group of the I.L.P., including, amongst the signatories, Helen Crawford, S. Saklatvala and E. H. Brown. But the greeting of the greatest political significance came from Lenin. "Having received", he wrote, "the letter of the Joint Provisional Committee of the Communist Party of Britain, dated June 20, 1920, I hasten to reply in accordance with their request that I am in complete sympathy with their plans for the immediate organisation of a Communist Party in England. I consider the policy of Comrade Sylvia Pankhurst and of the W.S.F. in refusing to collaborate in the amalgamation of the B.S.P., S.L.P., and others into one C.P. to be wrong. I personally am in favour of participation in Parliament and of adhesion to the Labour Party on condition of free and independent Communist activity. This policy I am going to defend at the Second Congress of the Third International on July 15, at Moscow.² I consider it most desirable that a Communist Party be speedily organised on the basis of the decisions and principles of the

¹ It should be noted that the Communist Unity Groups represented were not only S.L.P. groups. Wherever individuals could come together to form a group, under the terms of the invitation they were entitled to send a representative.

² The Second Congress of the Third (Communist) International was, in fact, held from July 19–August 7, 1920, and was in session while the Unity Convention was taking place.

Third International, and that that Party be brought into close touch with the Industrial Workers of the World and the Shop Stewards' committees in order to bring about their complete union."

The Convention passed without pause to the discussion of the resolution on fundamental strategy moved by A. A. Purcell¹ of the Salford B.S.P. and seconded by William Mellor of the Guild Communist Group. The resolution declared for Soviets or Workers' Councils as the means by which political power could be won by the working class, for the dictatorship of the proletariat as "the necessary means for combating the counter-revolution during the transition period between capitalism and Communism", for the adoption of these as steps towards the "establishment of a system of complete Communism wherein the means of production shall be communally owned and controlled". It constituted, as from this Convention, the Communist Party of Great Britain, affiliated to the Third (Communist) International.

Discussion on this resolution was very short. The fact that the delegates had come to the Convention already pledged to support the very principles enunciated therein, meant that there was no basis for any deep difference or polemic.

Support for the dictatorship of the proletariat was not just a snap decision. It had been the subject of much discussion in militant socialist circles in the previous year.

It is true that to those not conversant with the Marxist use of the term it seemed somewhat alien and harsh.

But to those who had discussed it and understood its meaning, it seemed both clear enough and essential.

The existing British state was not, as reformism claimed, a neutral body. It was a *capitalist* state. Despite all the liberties and rights won in hard struggle by the working people, it remained, in essence, an expression of the power and authority of the capitalists. It was the *dictatorship* of the capitalists. Within its framework socialism could not be established.

Only when power had been won by the working class and its allies, when the rule of the working people had been established, when politi-

¹ A. A. Purcell, who was later to become Chairman of the T.U.C., was born in 1872. He was long a leader and official of the National Amalgamation of Furnishing Trades Associations (N.A.F.T.A.). He had known William Morris as a very fine employer in Merton Abbey (the Morris works). He was a member of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C., 1919-1921, and first became a member of the General Council of the T.U.C. in 1921.

cal power had been taken from the hands of the capitalist minority into the hands of the working people led by the working class, when, in Marxist terminology, the dictatorship of the proletariat had been established, would the building of socialism be possible.

Such a dictatorship would mean a great advance in democracy for the majority of the nation. Political power in the hands of the working class, the dictatorship of the proletariat, would, it was considered, be necessary not only to defend the revolution from hostile attacks from reaction at home and abroad but, above all, to guide the building of socialism.

All this had already been discussed, debated and agreed. It was not felt necessary to renew the discussion and the resolution was adopted unanimously.

It might be said, in passing, that one delegate, Harry Webb of the Ashton Communist Group, having loudly proclaimed the need for men with guns in their hands, was quietly told by Bob Stewart of Dundee, that the aim of the Communist Party was the minimum not maximum of violence:

“A great many people talked about guns who would run away when they saw one. I am more interested”, he added, “in folks having brains in their heads.”

The Convention turned to the first of the items on tactical questions—for which all delegates were impatiently awaiting—the debate on parliamentary action.

Debate on Parliamentary Action

The resolution on parliamentary action was moved by Tom Bell. It repudiated the reformist conception that socialism can be won by purely parliamentary activity and successive parliamentary elections, but proclaimed that electoral and parliamentary activity provided a valuable means of propaganda and agitation for socialism. The new Communist Party must carry out electoral activity both in the local councils and the House of Commons and its representatives, when elected, must fight for the policy decided by the Party.

The discussion took the form of a direct debate—speakers taking sides and arguing for or against. Six speakers opposed the resolution and thirteen supported it. Amongst the supporters were, besides Bell himself, Robert Williams (Secretary of the Transport Workers' Federation) who had met Lenin when visiting Russia on the British

Labour delegation as a representative of the Labour Party Executive, Mrs. D. B. Montefiore (Glasgow College B.S.P.), William Mellor (Guild Communists), Bob Stewart, F. L. Kerran (Central London B.S.P.), A. R. Siffleet (Tooting B.S.P.). Amongst the opposers were Harry Webb, (Ashton-under-Lyne C.U.G.) and C. L. Gibbons (Ferndale Socialist Society).

What was the essence of the polemic?

The main case of those who opposed parliamentary and electoral activity, and they spoke from long and bitter experience, was that Parliament corrupts, and that, no matter what measures were taken, elected M.P.s could not under capitalism be controlled or recalled. How many of those sent by the efforts of militant workers to council or Parliament, full of fight and promise, forgot their past struggles and promises and deserted the cause of socialism!

Some argued that in any case it was through *industrial action* and not through Parliament that socialism would be achieved. Economic power was the issue and industrial action the road to it:

"... it was economic power outside Parliament that controlled the inevitable development of working-class conditions." (J. R. Stead, St. Helens Socialist Society.)

The revolution, they argued, would be made *in the factory*:

"In the factory, where you talked to the workmen, was the point where organisation should take place." (C. Abbott, Southwark Herald League.)

It was a waste of time, said some, a waste of money and energy to "indulge" in parliamentary activity, the young revolutionary forces in Britain could not afford that luxury:

"We needed every man, every penny, every ounce of enthusiasm, and every moment of time in the vital work of the educational and industrial field." (C. L. Gibbons, Ferndale Socialist Society.)

Those supporting the motion endeavoured to make it clear that defending parliamentary action did *not* mean, in any sense, that socialism would be achieved by parliamentary action *alone*. But Parliament was an important tribunal of public opinion and it was necessary to use it, as one means amongst others, to influence the mass of the people:

"There would be elections whether we participated or not . . . people congregated to hear what the candidates had to say at election

times, and the opportunity for propaganda ought not to be missed. . . ." (Bob Stewart, Socialist Prohibition Fellowship.)

It was not true, they argued, that you could defeat capitalism by economic activity and industrial action alone. Political *and* economic struggle were necessary. The capitalists use *all* methods of struggle, and so must the working class:

"As much industrial propaganda was done in an election campaign as during the same amount of ordinary trade union workshop activity. Comrades must realise that fact, and realise that it was not always at the factory gate that the factory worker was waiting to listen to them. . . . If we had to wait until we got a perfect industrial organisation, we should have to wait until Doomsday. . . ." (E. Cant, Paisley B.S.P.)¹

To those who assumed that socialist Members of Parliament were doomed to inevitable corruption, the supporters of the resolution replied that Communist M.P.s must be subject to the Executive Committee of the Party, carry out Party policy, accept Party discipline:

"The candidate sent up by the Communist Party . . . would go to the House of Commons with a mandate from the Party . . . we must have discipline to the Communist Executive from all members whether inside or outside the House. . . ." (Tom Bell, Glasgow Communist Unity Group.)

A number of supporters of parliamentary activity stressed experience of the international working-class movement, of the role of Karl Liebknecht and Clara Zetkin in the Reichstag, of the Russian experience and of Lenin's advice. Yet there was in the strong and correct case made for the participation of revolutionary socialists in elections and Parliament under capitalism, amongst some delegates, a rather negative and grudging support. One or two saw it purely as a platform from which a spoke could be put in the wheel of capitalism, rather than a platform from which the whole programme of struggle for socialism could be advanced, helping the mass movement of struggle outside Parliament.²

When finally, after heated debate, the motion was put to the vote by cards, the result showed *186 cards*, representing 4,650 votes, *for the motion*, and *19 cards*, representing 475 votes, *against*.

¹ E. Cant had been sent up from London to Scotland by the B.S.P.

² Compare W. Hill (Oldham C.U.G.)—"By obstructive tactics Parliament could be used to great effect. We did not want men who could go there to ameliorate the condition of the workers, but men whose object was to smash the machine."

The motion was finally accepted with an addendum, that representatives of the Party in council or House of Commons who went against the policy of the Party should be called upon to give up their seats and to resign from the Party.

Debate on Affiliation to the Labour Party

The results of the debate on parliamentary action had been clear in advance as both main groups within the Convention—B.S.P. and C.U.G.—were in favour of it. The discussion expectantly awaited by the delegates, the real source of division, was on affiliation to the Labour Party.

The discussion took the form of a direct debate. Two opposing motions were put forward:

(a) That the Communist Party shall be affiliated to the Labour Party—moved by J. F. Hodgson of Grimsby B.S.P., a calm, cogent, reasoned speaker.

(b) That the Communist Party shall not be affiliated to the Labour Party—moved by William Paul, long-time member of the S.L.P., practised speaker and lecturer, one of the first British Marxists to write on the question of the state.

Twenty-three speakers participated in the discussions—nine for affiliation and fourteen against. Amongst those supporting, along with J. F. Hodgson, were George Deer (Rawtenstall B.S.P.), F. L. Kerran (Central London B.S.P.) who on the grounds of his German origin had been interned for a great part of the war, W. Mellor (Guild Communists), on the staff of the *Daily Herald*. W. P. Coates (Leeds B.S.P.), bringing to the discussion several years' experience as an organiser of the Transport and General Workers' Union in Ireland, Fred Willis (Willesden B.S.P.) who for a considerable period had been Editor of *The Call*, R. Page Arnot (Guild Communists) and Fred Shaw, long a well-known figure in the B.S.P. standing for the council in his native Yorkshire, and, then, for Greenock as official Labour candidate in the 1918 General Election.¹

Amongst the opposers, alongside W. Paul, were T. Barber (Southwark B.S.P.), George Deacon (North Divisional Herald League, Communist Group), Harry Webb (Ashton-under-Lyne C.U.G.), R. Nicolai (Coventry C.U.G.) and Tom Bell.

What was the essence of the debate?

¹ His election agent in this election was J. R. Campbell.

Those opposing affiliation maintained that the Labour Party was through and through corrupt. There was no hope for any part of it. From their own experience, said some, they had seen its corrupting role. One delegate

“opposed affiliation to the Labour Party from personal experience. . . . He and other members of the Southwark B.S.P., as it was then, stood as Labour candidates at the last Borough Council elections. They got in and were by that time disgusted absolutely by the policy and actions of the Labour Party.” (T. Barber, Southwark B.S.P.)

A constantly recurring argument was that the new party must be kept clean, untarnished, free from corruption. Any relations with the Labour Party, they maintained, were bound to sully it and, what is more, discredit it, compromise it, in the eyes of the militant workers, who would never be able to understand the “subtle” reasons advanced for affiliation:

“Delegates from the Rhondda dare not go back and tell the people there to continue to support what was already discredited. . . .” (C. L. Gibbons, Ferndale Socialist Society.)

“The first essential to rally together all the elements in the country in favour of Communism was to make it clear that we have no associations with and did not stand for the same policy as the Labour Party . . . we wanted a Communist Party clear and distinct from any associations with reformism or the Labour Party.” (Tom Bell.)

Some mentioned that affiliation would restrict and cripple the independent revolutionary action of the Communists. How could reformism be exposed by a party owing loyalty to the reformist Labour Party?

“If we affiliated to the Labour Party we should be in a position of inutility as a Party. We should not be able to expose the actions of the past nor the purposes of the future . . . how could we be loyal or apply for affiliation to a Party with a constitution such as the muddled constitution of the Labour Party?” (W. Hill, Oldham C.U.G.)

It was no use arguing, said some, that support for parliamentary action implies some sort of relations with the Labour Party. The Labour Party’s attitude to parliamentary action is diametrically opposed to ours. There is no connection between our decisions on parliamentary

activity and our decision on the Labour Party. The Labour Party is part of the Second International, we stand for the Third International.

As for Lenin's advice, Lenin, they said, was a great revolutionary leader for whom all had respect, but Lenin was not infallible. On general principles and international developments we should follow Lenin, but on questions of tactics for Britain we knew best:

"There is not one in this audience to whom I yield in admiration for Lenin but, as we said yesterday, Lenin is no pope or god . . . on local circumstances, where we are on the spot, we are the people to decide." (W. Paul—Joint Provisional Committee.)

Those supporting the case for affiliation, ably led by J. F. Hodgson of the B.S.P., argued that support for affiliation did not mean in any sense support for right-wing policy or the right-wing leaders of the Labour Party. Indeed, affiliation would mean a better opportunity to oppose that policy and those leaders. With regard to those leaders, declared Hodgson, speaking of the character of the MacDonalds, Snowdens and Thomases:

" . . . I would say that they are the deadly enemy of the revolution which you and I are seeking. I say that these men are destined to play the part of your Scheidemanns and Noskes. . . ." ¹

But, they forcibly argued, in the trade unions militants and revolutionaries also meet right-wing leaders and often have to combat right-wing class-collaboration policy. No one at the Convention was suggesting that it was incorrect for revolutionaries to take their place in the trade unions; why should it be wrong, then, to work inside the Labour Party?

" . . . Here you meet on the industrial field in the trade union certain trade union leaders, you are fully aware that, whether or not through sheer rascality, duplicity and corruption, they are misleading the working class. You meet them there with the intention of destroying their influence, and of winning the confidence and trust of the rank and file to that end. That is exactly the kind of tactics I believe in. But may I remind you that you meet the same people in the Labour Party, and that you meet them on a much larger field than you do in the trade unions?" (J. F. Hodgson.)

¹ Scheidemann and Noske were German Social Democrats execrated by militant workers for their responsibility for attacks on and shooting of German workers at the time of the German Revolution.

To be affiliated to the Labour Party, they maintained, did not in any way mean being identified with Labour Party policy or Labour Party leaders. Different parties with very different policies were affiliated to the Labour Party, from the Fabians to the B.S.P. Indeed it was as a part of the Labour Party that the Communist Party would best be able to put its own point of view before the workers, so that the workers could choose.

The Communist Party, they insisted, must, it is true, be the vanguard of the working class and of the working people, but what is a vanguard if it is not closely connected with the mass of the workers?

"It is truly said that the mission of our Party is to be the vanguard of the revolutionary working class. You cannot be the vanguard unless you are going to march with the working class. . . ." (J. F. Hodgson.)

What will be the result, they asked, of remaining outside the Labour Party? Only to have the great majority of the workers at the mercy of the extreme right wing—only to help that right. To identify the great mass of Labour Party members with the right-wing leaders is completely wrong:

"You are thinking all the time of the Labour Party as consisting of its leaders. It is nothing of the sort. Go to a Labour Party meeting. You will find delegates of the local trade unions, the best men who could be selected in the locality to act as delegates. . . . How is it in the great political movement of the workers, they are victimised by people such as we know? Because the other people . . . have got hold of the political movement of the workers, because we have been absent." (J. F. Hodgson.)

One delegate, R. Page Arnot, emphasised the special character of the British Labour Party, the loose federation, with socialist parties of different outlooks as members, and mass trade union affiliation, and showed how this demanded a different approach from that of the normal Continental social-democratic parties.

Strong arguments were put, by those who supported affiliation, against the "purism", the "dogmatism" of those who wanted to "march straight ahead", without swerving, to the revolution. What success, they asked, would the Bolsheviks have had in Russia if they had never varied their tactics, made compromises, formed alliances? Some quoted the approach of Marx who had worked with British

Labour leaders like Odger, Lucraft and Applegarth. Others cited the opinions and examples of Lenin.

Hodgson, in the last speech of the debate, summing up and replying to the discussion, ended with these words:

“Let us start right. Let us start as a Party which is dealing with realities and not abstractions. Let us start as a Party which is not merely dealing in theories—though it can do that—but is also ready, as I have said before, to march step by step with the working class leading them on to victory: not by reason of the fact that it sets itself up on a pedestal as having a superior knowledge to the working class, but in all of the working-class movement, directing it, inspiring it, carrying it ultimately to victory. . . .”

When the final vote was taken, and it was clear from the debate that it would be a near thing, it showed a *small majority of 100 to 85* for affiliation to the Labour Party. By previous agreement the minority was committed to the majority decision, but this did not, in fact, mean by any means that they had as yet been intellectually convinced.¹

Organisation and Leadership

The Convention despatched telegrams of greeting to the Third (Communist) International and to the Soviet Government representatives newly arrived in Britain. A few minor problems were left to the new leadership.

One of them was a resolution moved by Bob Stewart of the Socialist Prohibition Fellowship calling on the Communist Party to throw its weight in favour of complete suppression of the manufacture of alcoholic liquors for beverage purposes, which finding no mass support in the Convention was referred to the new Executive for decision.²

With fundamental approaches and tactical questions discussed, the other important issue that remained was the future organisation and the new leadership of the Party.

The Convention adopted a document prepared by the Joint Provisional Committee—“Tentative proposals providing for transformation into the Communist Party”—mainly concerned with measures of

¹ In fact directly the vote had been taken William Mellor (in deep and dramatic tones, I am informed) got up and declared that as so serious a decision had been taken, its implementation should be delayed three months in order for its implications to sink in. The result was the reverse, and the application eventually sent to the Labour Party was highly influenced by those who hoped for nothing better than refusal. (See Chapter II).

² The Executive has not yet taken action. (1967)

a purely organisational character. By this it was agreed that the new leadership should prepare a draft Constitution and Rules and submit them to the membership, that it should work to transform all existing groups and branches of the different bodies into units of the Communist Party, that the Party should issue a central weekly organ, the *Communist*, that the Party Centre should be situated provisionally at the old B.S.P. office at 21a, Maiden Lane, only a few hundred yards from the King Street site that was to become the new centre for the Communist Party.

There was virtually nothing in the document that reflected the need for a party not only with a new type of programme but with a new type of organisation, except for the last clause:

“That all members extend loyalty and fidelity to the Communist Party as being greater and of more consequence than the personal and individual quality of any member thereof, and urge that all members subordinate themselves to the general will of the Party.”

It was agreed that a Provisional Executive Committee should be formed by adding to the existing Joint Provisional Committee six delegates elected by the Convention.

To the Joint Committee—*B.S.P.*, J. F. Hodgson, A. A. Watts, Fred Willis; *C.U.G.*, Tom Bell, Arthur MacManus, William Paul; *S.W.C.C.*, W. J. Hewlett, *Secretary* A. Inkpin—were added, therefore, by election (in order of votes received) Fred Shaw, Bob Stewart, Dr. D. B. Montefiore, C. L. Malone, George Deer, William Mellor. MacManus was appointed as Chairman, Watts as Treasurer and Albert Inkpin as Secretary.

On the day the Convention opened, the *Daily Herald*, still in those days a militant paper, summed up in these words in its leader the formation of the Communist Party:

“Today the National Convention that is to form the C.P.G.B. meets in London.

“The founding of such a Party we can count emphatically a gain to the movement in the country. It is not a new split. It is indeed a fusion. But it is more than that. It is the creation of an organisation for the expression in action of a definite and existent body of revolutionary thought. . . .

“They are preparing to face the problem which too many of us are inclined temperamentally to evade—the problem of the ‘how’

and 'now' of the British revolution. In so far as their basis is already decided, they seem to have avoided very well the twin trap of a too rigid orthodoxy and a too vague latitudinarianism. They stand rigidly for revolution and against all compromises with capitalism. They declare definitely for the Soviet idea and the dictatorship of the proletariat. . . .

"In any revolutionary movement the alternative is not between dictatorship and no dictatorship. It is between the dictatorship of the workers and the dictatorship of the capitalists—or of their generals.

"To accept that is really to accept facts. And to refuse it seems to us merely to ignore facts which happen to be unpalatable. The strong point of the Communist Party is its steady realism. . . ."

The first step had been taken. But though the Convention had "fused", brought together into the Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.) some of the main revolutionary forces, others still remained outside. The process of "fusion", unification, still had to continue.

From the first (Unity Convention) Congress the C.P. adopted in practice the official name of Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.). This was made official in the Constitution and Statutes adopted later.

SECOND CONGRESS OF THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

While the delegates to the Unity Convention were fighting out the tactical line of the new party, a similar debate on a larger international scale was taking place at the sessions of the Second Congress of the Third (Communist) International. Similar differences of approach and tactics existed in varying degrees throughout the world revolutionary movement.

At the first, the foundation congress, of the Communist International (Moscow, March 2-6, 1919) the British revolutionary movement had not been officially represented. Joseph Fineberg, a leading member of the British Socialist Party, had attended in his personal capacity, but, being of Russian origin, he remained in his native land.

And now, to the Second Congress (which was to decide fundamental strategy and tactics), by difficult and devious routes—for the young Soviet Republic was already surrounded by an iron curtain of capitalist armies and police—a number of British workers' representatives made their way. Ten British delegates officially or unofficially attended some

or all of the Congress sessions between July 19–August 7, 1920.¹

Six were officially registered as delegates to the Congress: Tom Quelch and William MacLaine of the B.S.P.; David Ramsay, Jack Tanner and J. T. Murphy from the Shop Stewards; Dick Beech from the International Workers of the World (I.W.W.), each with a full vote. Marjory Newbold from the National League of Working Youth was accepted with a consultative vote. William Gallacher, as leader of the Scottish Shop Stewards and Scottish Workers' Committee was not registered as a delegate, but participated (very vigorously) in the sessions. Sylvia Pankhurst (C.P. (B.S.T.I.)) arrived late and attended the latter sessions.² J. S. Clarke of Glasgow also attended.³

The Congress discussed and adopted theses and resolutions on the International Situation and the Tasks of the Communist International, the Role and Structure of the Communist Party, the National and Colonial Question, the conditions for accepting Parties into the International, the Agrarian Question, the Position of and Attitude towards Trade Unions and Factory Committees, the Conditions for establishing Soviets and their Role, the Constitution of the Communist International. A number of key tactical questions were debated such as parliamentarianism, and, on the request of the B.S.P. delegation, a special commission was established to review the question of affiliation of the British Communists to the Labour Party. Lenin, who had drafted some of the main theses, participated throughout the congress, in sessions, commissions and personal discussions, giving political leadership to the congress as a whole.

Both in the special commissions and in the main sessions the British delegates engaged in the debates, each group, as was to be expected, defending its own particular line.

Participation in parliamentary activity was strongly opposed by W. Gallacher, by the other shop stewards' representatives (except Murphy) and by Sylvia Pankhurst. The Communist International, by supporting parliamentary action, declared Gallacher, was taking the

¹ The delegates and their registration must have been almost haphazard in the sense that those who could get there, if warranted, could become delegates. Salme Murrik, who came to Britain in the beginning of 1920 as a representative of the Communist International to assist in the negotiations for the foundation of the Communist Party, helped to organise the British delegation. She married R. Palme Dutt in 1922. See Preface to her *Lucifer and other Poems*, The Mitre Press, 1965.

² For above see: *Protocol—Second Congress of Communist International—Moscow 1934*; Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*. Message from British delegates to Second Congress of C.I. in *Communist*, No. 1, August 5, 1920.

³ John S. Clark was Editor of the *Scottish Worker* from 1918 to 1922.

road of opportunism. Instead of busying itself with the problem of arousing the masses it was diverting the masses by discussion of how to take part in elections. It was naïve, he argued, to hope that those elected to Parliament would continue, once arrived there, to fight for the principles of Communism. The B.S.P. delegation, supported on this by J. T. Murphy, supported revolutionary participation in parliamentary action.

The shop stewards' delegates, though not categorically standing for withdrawal from the official trade unions, were deeply suspicious of them, tended to belittle their role, found it hard to see how, with corrupt right-wing leaders, they could, even under pressure, become weapons of the working class. They put all the emphasis on workshop struggle and on unofficial alternative leadership from the shop stewards and workshop committees, tending to counterpose this to trade union activity.

On the issue of the Labour Party, the B.S.P. delegates, of course, argued the case for affiliation, though tending, in putting the case (MacLaine) to underestimate the reactionary nature of the Labour Party leadership and to confuse its primarily working-class composition with its essentially bourgeois outlook. All the other British delegates vigorously opposed. The B.S.P. delegates maintained that the Labour Party was the political expression of the trade union movement, that it was not fixed for ever in one political position, that it could be changed by mass pressure, that there were possibilities within it for free criticism of reformism. Against this Gallacher, Sylvia Pankhurst and the others took their stand. Who were the B.S.P., asked Gallacher, to speak of influencing the masses? It was the shop stewards' and workers' committees that had, in fact, led the masses, and theirs was the example to follow.

In the discussion on the role of the Communist Party, the general attitude of the shop stewards' representatives was to stand for revolution but without a revolutionary party, to see the shop stewards' organisations themselves as the organisations most capable of carrying through revolutionary action, to deduce from their experience of political parties in the past that there was no need for and no role for any new type of political party.

In the discussions on the national and colonial question, the British delegates found themselves forced to face up, some of them for the first time, to the deep weakness of even the most revolutionary sections of the British working class—their lack of understanding of this question,

and the low level of solidarity given by the British working-class movement to the national revolutionary movement of the colonial workers and people.

Thus in the course of the debates the British delegates not only reflected the main tactical divisions that split the revolutionary groups in Britain, but for the first time found themselves discussing these problems at an international revolutionary gathering, where they were confronted with the knowledge and experience of the best representatives of the international working-class movement, including the patient persuasion, comradely help, and political genius of Lenin.

LENIN ON BRITAIN

Back in the Communist Unity Convention in London, Lenin's message had been received with tremendous enthusiasm. In the discussions a number of delegates made reference to Lenin's writings and speeches. But to the British workers of 1920, including the British Marxists, Lenin was better known as the leader of the October Revolution than as a great theoretician of Marxism.

Lenin's theoretical works were hardly known in Britain before the October Revolution. By 1920, through the columns of *The Call*, *The Socialist*, *The Workers' Dreadnought* and the pamphlets of B.S.P., S.L.P. and W.S.F. (aided by the People's Russian Information Bureau in London and the Socialist Information and Research Bureau in Scotland, another early Russian information centre) a few major works like *The Collapse of the Second International*, *State and Revolution*, *Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, had been made available, with a number of speeches and articles. Lenin had corresponded with Sylvia Pankhurst already in August 1919.¹ His *Left-Wing Communism* (April-May 1920) had been published *before* the Communist Unity Convention, but though the delegates knew of it they did not as yet have the text. Gallacher found it awaiting him when he arrived in Moscow to attend the Second Congress of the Communist International. It was from this congress onwards that a deeper understanding of Lenin's theoretical writings and of his approach to British questions began to penetrate the British revolutionary movement.

For Lenin was not only the great practical and theoretical leader of the international working-class movement, he had deeply studied

¹ "Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst", *Lenin on Britain*, Lawrence and Wishart 1959, pp. 422-428. Henceforth abbreviated to L.O.B.

Britain—British capitalism and imperialism, the strategy and tactics (and the personalities) of the British ruling class from die-hard Churchills to wily Lloyd Georges, British reformism with its Hendersons and Ramsay MacDonalds, the history, struggles, internal differences, literature and leaders of the working-class movement. He had learned English, lived in England and over the years had followed the British socialist press. Sitting for seven years on the International Socialist Bureau, Lenin had an opportunity of meeting personally the various British representatives from Hyndman and Quelch to MacDonald and Hardie.

He followed carefully the struggle between the pro-war chauvinists and the internationalists in the socialist movement during the war. When the war was over he attentively followed the great post-war labour struggles, the springing up of the Councils of Action in August 1920 and their fight against anti-Soviet intervention.

In his *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism* (October 1916), Lenin developed the ideas of Marx and Engels on the history and character of the British labour movement. He traced the impact on the labour movement of Britain's virtual monopoly of the world market, of Britain's position as "workshop of the world" after the middle of the nineteenth century. Britain, he explained, before other capitalist countries, and before the period of imperialism proper, has developed two characteristic features of imperialism:

"(1) vast colonies, and (2) monopoly profit (due to her monopolistic position of the world market). In both respects Britain at that time was an exception among capitalistic countries, and Engels and Marx, analysing this exception, quite clearly and definitely indicated its *connection* with the victory (temporary) of opportunism in the British Labour Movement." (*Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*.)¹

From Britain's privileged position between 1850-1880 arose the capacity of British capitalism to give a small share in this privilege to an upper (privileged) section of the British working class, the skilled, the aristocracy of labour, who, as a result, began to accept the system from which they culled their privileges, to see the need for a partnership between capital and labour, and however hard (and courageously) they might fight to defend and improve their immediate conditions—wages, hours and workshop rights—to do this *within the system*, forget about changing the system and see the solution of all their problems as

¹ L.O.B., p. 317.

possible within this system of capitalism. Opportunism, the replacement of the long-term interests of the whole working class by the immediate interests of a section of the class, began, ideologically, to dominate the labour movement. The earlier socialist ideas, the revolutionary ideas of left-wing Chartism, fell away on the new infertile soil. The Labour leaders became Liberals and radicals, and the socialist movement died.

But, as Lenin again and again explained, by the end of the 1870's Britain's privileged position was being challenged. New rivals had raised their heads. Germany, France, the U.S.A., later, in the Far East, Japan, began to catch up and in some respects outstrip Britain. But losing its monopoly position in the world market, British capitalism stretched its greedy hands over vast new stretches of the world, especially Africa, and British capitalism began more and more to secure its profits by export of capital rather than export of goods. Whilst super-profits culled from its monopoly of world trade began to fall, super-profits still poured in from the export of capital and the exploitation of tens of millions of black, yellow, brown, colonial and semi-colonial peoples scattered in the "far-flung Empire".

True, as Engels had forecast, with the loss of Britain's monopoly position in the 1880's the socialist movement and socialist ideas returned to Britain.¹ With the formation of the Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.) in 1883 (or more strictly in 1881) and Socialist League in 1884, Marxism began to be studied and accepted by a vanguard of the British working class, but when socialist ideas and activity returned to Britain, there was, on the basis of imperialism and imperialist super-profit, still a basis for opportunism, and within this socialist movement, alongside and opposing the Marxist revolutionary trend, there arose a right-wing, opportunist, reformist trend, characterised by the Fabian Society (founded in 1884), the right-wing leaders of the I.L.P. (founded 1893), and then of the Labour Party. Henceforth within the British labour movement two trends were in conflict—Marxist, revolutionary versus right-wing, reformist. As Lenin put it:

"It is in the struggle between these two tendencies that the history of the labour movement will now inevitably develop."²

Lenin explained, therefore, what hitherto had been so little understood even in the revolutionary section of the British labour move-

¹ *Labour Standard*, June 18, 1881. *Preface to Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844*, January 1892.

² *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*, L.O.B., p. 323.

ment, the direct connection between imperialism and the opportunism and reformism whose influence had so deeply penetrated the working-class movement. He explained the corruption not in subjective terms of successions of rotten individuals and personal traitors (though he never denied that there were such) but in terms of the economic development of British capitalism and its impact on the working-class movement.

And he drew the logical lesson, that whatever temporary gains a section of the British workers might have received at the expense of the colonial and oppressed peoples throughout the world, imperialism impeded the historical development of the British working-class movement, sapped its militancy, split it, corrupted it, and bound it tight to the capitalist system. The partial gains of a section were paid for by the subjection of the class as a whole. From this he concluded that the British working class had as their natural allies the mass of colonial and semi-colonial peoples in struggles for national liberation against imperialism. It was not only the duty of the British workers as revolutionaries, making a principle of international working-class solidarity, to show their support for the national liberation movement, but this was essential for the success of their own struggle to defeat capitalism in Britain. The struggle of the British working class for socialism was inextricably linked with the struggle of the masses in the Empire—in India, Egypt, Africa—for national independence. Lenin demonstrated, as Marx and Engels before him, that a nation that oppresses others cannot itself be free.

Understanding the deep roots of opportunism and reformism in the British labour movement, he studied and constantly exposed the role of the leading reformists like Ramsay MacDonald with their:

“smooth, euphonious, hackneyed, apparently socialist phrases which have long served in all the advanced capitalist countries to conceal bourgeois policy within the working-class movement.”¹

And he drew the logical conclusion that:

“A split with such people is necessary and inevitable, for the social revolution cannot be accomplished by joining hands with those who pull in the direction of the bourgeoisie.”²

But, continuing the approach of Marx and Engels, he saw that one of the main obstacles to successful struggle against opportunism and reformism was the dry, pedantic, dogmatic, sectarian attitude that

¹ *The Tasks of the Third International*, August 1919, L.O.B., p. 405.

² *Ibid.*, p. 406.

weighed so heavily on many British revolutionaries, cutting them off, isolating them from the mass of the working class. He, therefore, and particularly in the period of preparation for the Communist Party, directed his fire not only against right-wing reformism, but also, and simultaneously, against sectarianism.

In his "Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst" (August 28, 1919), in *Left Wing Communism* (April–May 1920), in his *Draft Theses for the Second Congress of the Communist International* and in his speeches at that congress (July–August 1920), he strongly attacked the ultra-leftists, super-revolutionaries, "infantile left" who wanted a "pure" revolution, a straight road to socialism without swerve, setback, compromise, alliance.

He had every respect for revolutionary workers like William Gallacher, revolting against the disgusting corruption and repeated betrayals of reformism, tearing themselves out of the marsh of class-collaboration, but when he thought that in their revolutionary ardour they were marching ahead too fast and too far from the mass of the workers, separating themselves off from them, he strongly criticised them. Revolutionary temper, he declared, is not enough. He argued that with Gallacher and those like him:

"... we must openly and frankly tell them that temper *alone* is not enough to lead the masses in a great revolutionary struggle, and that such and such mistakes that thoroughly loyal adherents of the cause of the revolution are about to commit, or are committing, may damage the cause of the revolution."¹

"... The writer [Gallacher] of the letter is imbued with the noblest proletarian hatred for the bourgeois 'class politician' (a hatred understood and shared, however, not only by proletarians but by all working people, by all 'small folk', to use a German expression). This hatred of a representative of the oppressed and exploited masses is verily 'the beginning of all wisdom', the basis of every socialist and communist movement and of its successes. But the writer apparently does not appreciate that politics is a science and an art that does not drop from the skies, that it is not obtained gratis, and that the proletariat, if it wants to conquer the bourgeoisie, must produce *its own* proletarian 'class politicians', and such as will be no worse than the bourgeois politicians."²

To those, like Sylvia Pankhurst, who wanted to march *straight* to the

¹ *Left-Wing Communism*, L.O.B., p. 461.

² *Ibid.*, p. 462.

revolution, Lenin explained that the task of a Communist who wants to be "not merely a class-conscious, convinced, well grounded propagandist, but a practical leader of the *masses* in the revolution" is to combine "the strictest devotion to the ideas of Communism" with "the ability to effect all the necessary practical compromises, manœuvres, agreements, zig-zags, retreats. . . ."¹

He taught, in a word, that the British revolutionaries had not only to break away from and combat the all-pervading influence of reformism, but in so doing, to break with their own sectarian habits and approaches, that had weakened their revolutionary activity and led them to isolation.

It was with this two-sided approach of opposition on the one hand to right-wing opportunism, reformism, class-collaboration, and, on the other, to sectarianism, leftism, that Lenin examined the two tactical questions that divided the British Marxists—attitude to Parliament and to the Labour Party.

He completely rejected the parliamentarianism of the reformists, who saw the road forward for the working class as the securing through their elected representatives in the councils and House of Commons a succession of reforms within the capitalist state and framework of capitalism, who subordinated their whole activity to elections, who sought at all stages to damp down the struggle, to "restrain" the workers from mass action, who subordinated their whole organisation to the parliamentary group which took its own decisions and decided its own conduct irrespective of the decisions of the Annual Conference. *Their* road, Lenin explained, was one of protecting capitalism, helping to maintain it.

But he equally rejected the tactics of those who, from the "left", threw out the baby with the bath-water and, from their opposition to *reformist* parliamentarianism, rejected every form of parliamentary activity. The critics of parliamentarianism in Europe and America, he wrote to Sylvia Pankhurst, in August 1919:

"are very often wrong in so far as they reject *all participation* in elections and parliamentary activity. Here they simply show their lack of revolutionary experience."²

And he added:

"... if the workers' party is really *revolutionary*, if it is really a *workers'* party (that is, connected with the masses, with the majority of the

¹ Ibid., p. 479.

² "Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst," L.O.B., p. 425.

working people, with the *rank and file* of the proletariat and not merely with its upper stratum), if it is really a *party*, i.e. a firmly, effectively knit *organisation of the revolutionary vanguard*, which knows how to carry on revolutionary work among the masses by all possible means, then such a party will surely be able to keep *its own* parliamentarians in hand, to make of them real revolutionary propagandists, such as Karl Liebknecht was, and not opportunists, not corrupters of the proletariat with bourgeois methods, bourgeois customs, bourgeois ideas, bourgeois poverty of ideas."¹

The role of Communists in Parliament, he explained, is not to copy the conduct of the reformists, but to create a new style, a revolutionary style of revolutionary activity in Parliament, to make Parliament a tribune from which a militant revolutionary policy can be put before the working class and the people, helping the struggle of the mass of the workers and people waged outside Parliament:

"The Communists in West Europe and America must learn to create a new, unusual, non-opportunist, non-careerist parliamentarianism . . . [they] should everywhere set people thinking, draw the masses into activity, hold the bourgeoisie to their word and utilise the apparatus they have set up, the elections they have appointed, the appeals they have made to the whole people, and tell the people what Bolshevism is in a way that has never been possible (under bourgeois rule) outside of election times. . . . It is very difficult to do this in West Europe and America, very, very difficult; but it can and it must be done. . . ."²

With the same two-sided approach Lenin examined the tactical question, so much debated, on the attitude of British revolutionaries to the Labour Party.

The complicated question of the British Labour Party was not a new one for Lenin. He had much pondered it and, in fact, had to face it himself as early as 1908 at the meeting of the International Socialist Bureau (I.S.B.).³

At this meeting the question came up for discussion as to whether or not the Labour Party had the right to be affiliated to the Second International when, according to its rules, one of the conditions for affiliation was "adoption of the viewpoint of the proletarian class struggle".

¹ Ibid. L.O.B., p. 426.

² *Left-Wing Communism*, L.O.B., p. 482-3.

³ *Meeting of the International Socialist Bureau*, October 16, 1908, L.O.B., pp. 110-117. A translation of the article by Zelda Kahan appeared in *Justice*, but was not particularly sympathetically received by the S.D.F. leaders.

The I.L.P., through its delegate Bruce Glasier, demanded the direct recognition of the Labour Party as an affiliated section, contemptuously putting aside questions of principle as "formulae", "catechisms". Kautsky, the German socialist leader, who, on this issue, took a centrist position, dissociated himself from the I.L.P., but strongly supported the acceptance of the Labour Party which, he said, though not directly recognising the proletarian class struggle, conducted this struggle "in practice" and was organised "independently of the bourgeois parties".

Hyndman, representative of the S.D.F., moved the rejection of the Labour Party. Ramsay MacDonald, to complete the picture, had proposed at the Stuttgart Congress of the I.S.B. that the class struggle clause should be removed from the constitution of the Second International.

Here were three attitudes, rightist, leftist and centrist; Lenin, who was attending the I.S.B., *rejected them all*. He stood strongly for the acceptance of the Labour Party, repudiated Hyndman's sectarianism *and* the unprincipled attitude of the I.L.P., and attacked Kautsky's contention that the Labour Party was independent of the bourgeoisie and was waging the class struggle in fact.

The Labour Party, said Lenin:

"represents the first step on the part of the really proletarian organisations of Britain towards a conscious class policy and towards a *Socialist Workers' party*."¹

Adding the illuminating remark:

"When there exist objective conditions which retard the growth of the political consciousness and class independence of the proletarian masses, one must be able patiently and steadfastly to work hand in hand with them, making no concessions in principles, but not refraining from activity *right in the midst* of the proletarian masses. . . . It was necessary to rectify the undoubted error committed by the British Social-Democratic Federation, but there was no need to give even a shadow of encouragement to *other, undoubted and not less important* errors of the British opportunists who lead the so-called Independent Labour Party."

In *Left-Wing Communism* and again at the Second Congress of the Communist International, Lenin argued that British Marxists united in a Communist Party, while putting up their own candidates for Parlia-

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

ment should in all other constituencies, where they had no candidate of their own, support the Labour candidate, and thus work for the election of a Labour government.

The majority of British workers, he explained, still follow the lead of the right-wing reformists. The masses have to learn from *their own experience* the nature of reformism and the reformist leaders. You will not be able by your (revolutionary) propaganda *alone* to get rid of the illusions in the minds of the workers. It is necessary, therefore, to help the Labour Party to office, so that the workers who now have faith in the right-wing Labour leaders will see them at work in practice, and through this experience, coupled with education in revolutionary ideas, will turn against reformism and see the need for a revolutionary, genuine socialist, road of advance.

In *Left-Wing Communism* (April–May 1920) Lenin only dealt with the question of support for a Labour government, and did not yet touch the question of affiliation. He came out for affiliation in his *Draft Theses on the Main Tasks of the Second Congress of the Second International* (July 4, 1920),¹ in his *Message to the London Unity Convention* (July 8, 1920)² and, above all, in his speeches at the Second Congress itself (July–August, 1920).

At the Second Congress, Lenin opposed both right-wing and leftist attitudes of British delegates on the affiliation issue.

To W. MacLaine of the B.S.P., supporter of affiliation, he explained that it was not correct to speak of the Labour Party as a political party of workers.

“Of course, the bulk of the members of the Labour Party are workers; however, whether a party is really a political party of the workers or not, depends not only upon whether it consists of workers but also upon who leads it, upon the content of its activities and of its political tactics. Only the latter determines whether we have before us really a political party of the proletariat. From this point of view, the only correct one, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party because, although it consists of workers, it is led by reactionaries, and the worst reactionaries at that, who act fully in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. . . .”³

But to Gallacher, to the other shop stewards’ representatives and to Sylvia Pankhurst, he explained that the Labour Party was a different

¹ L.O.B., pp. 499–500.

² Ibid., p. 503.

³ *Speech at Second Congress of Communist International*, August 6, 1920, L.O.B., p. 539.

sort of party from the Continental socialist parties, that the mass trade unions were affiliated, that the different socialist groups within it had had, to date, freedom of expression, and that, provided that freedom were maintained, it was correct, even essential, for the Communist Party to be affiliated:

"What we get here is collaboration between the vanguard of the working class and the backward workers—the rearguard. This collaboration is so important for the whole movement that we categorically insist that the British Communists should serve as a connecting link between the Party, i.e. the minority of the working class, and all the rest of the workers. . . ."¹

Insisting strongly that revolutionary workers should work and struggle wherever the masses were, in the trade unions however reactionary their leadership, affiliated to the Labour Party even when led by MacDonalds and Thomases, Lenin at the same time put particular emphasis on the building in each country, including Britain, of a Communist Party. He repeated this with great emphasis in his *Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst*, his *Left Wing Communism*, his *Message to the Unity Convention*, his *Speeches at the Second Congress of the Communist International*, and, later, in his personal letter to Tom Bell.

The formation of the Party is urgent, he repeatedly stressed. It should be formed even if for the moment there are two such parties existing side by side.² To the shop stewards' representatives at the Second Congress of the Communist International, suspicious of all political parties, tending to see the workers' committees themselves as the future revolutionary political leadership, he explained that what was wanted was a new type of revolutionary political party that would on the one hand give theoretical leadership, political understanding, training in the science and art of politics to the leading sections of the working class, while at the same time, close to the general movement, it would be capable of leading in struggle the mass of the working class.

A political party is needed, he argued with the shop stewards. To the socialist parties and groups who understood the need for politics, but stood isolated, it was the need for a party *integrally linked with the masses* and capable of leading them from day to day that Lenin repeatedly stressed:

¹ Speech at the Second Congress of the Communist International, July 23, 1920, L.O.B., p. 529.

² "Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst", August 28, 1919, L.O.B., p. 424.

"Indissoluble connection with the mass of the workers, the ability to agitate unceasingly among them, to participate in every strike, to respond to every demand of the masses—this is the chief thing for a Communist Party, especially in such a country as Britain. . . ."¹

The last message that Lenin sent, directed specifically to the British workers, was his letter to Tom Bell, written in English, in August 1921. It should be noted that here (though it was concerned in particular with the workers in South Wales) the essence of Lenin's advice was a *mass* party and a *daily* paper:

"... create a very good, really proletarian, really mass Communist Party . . . such a party which will really be the LEADING force in *all* Labour Movement . . . to start a daily paper of the working class. . . ."²

FURTHER NEGOTIATIONS

The Session of the Second Congress of the Communist International devoted to the Labour Party ended, after Lenin had spoken, with a vote of 58 to 24 in favour of affiliation.³

The Congress discussion and, above all, the patient persuasive argumentation of Lenin had its effect on the British delegation, especially on William Gallacher.

On August 1, 1920, the British delegates (Sylvia Pankhurst had not yet arrived) despatched a joint message to the Unity Convention in London, greeting the Convention and supporting the immediate establishment of the Communist Party.⁴

Gallacher has vividly described the effect on him of his discussions with Lenin.

"Gradually, as the discussion went on, I began to see the weakness of my position. . . .

"The more I talked with Lenin and the other comrades, the more I came to see what the party of the workers meant in the revolutionary struggle. It was on this, the conception of the Party, that the

¹ Ibid.

² 'To Comrade Tom Bell' (in English), L.O.B., pp. 562–564. See full text in Appendix I to this chapter.

³ Protokol, *Second Congress of Communist International* (in Russian) Moscow, 1934.

⁴ It arrived too late for the Convention but was printed in the *Communist*, No. 1, August 5, 1920.

genius of Lenin had expressed itself. A Party of revolutionary workers, with its roots in the factories and in the streets, winning the trade unions and the co-operatives with the correctness of its working-class policy, a Party with no other interests but the interests of the working class and peasant and petty bourgeois allies of the working class, such a Party, using every avenue of expression, could make an exceptionally valuable parliamentary platform for arousing the great masses of workers to energetic struggle against the capitalist enemy.

"Before I left Moscow, I had an interview with Lenin during which he asked me three questions.

'Do you admit you were wrong on the question of Parliament and affiliation to the Labour Party?'

'Will you join the C.P.G.B. when you return?'

'Will you do your best to persuade your Scottish comrades to join it?'

"To each of these questions I answered 'yes'."¹

Immediately following the Second Congress, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (E.C.C.I.) made a new call for the amalgamation with the now established C.P.G.B. of all other socialist and revolutionary groups remaining outside it, mentioning amongst others the C.P. (B.S.T.I.), Shop Stewards, Scottish Communist Groups, S.L.P. and Left Wing of the I.L.P. They called for the formation of a committee of representatives of all the organisations to prepare a further Unity Congress within four months, and at which all parties and groups should be represented according to their membership.²

The stage was set for the completion of the unity negotiations. For the next five months—from August 1920 to January 1921—a series of meetings and discussions followed, culminating in the Leeds Unity Convention at the end of January (to become known as the Second Congress of the C.P.G.B.).

Two factors ensured the successful outcome of these decisions. In the first place, the London Unity Convention had already united into a single organisation, the C.P.G.B., all the most important revolutionary groups outside Scotland, and the new organisation exercised a strong attraction on those that still remained outside, whatever the personal

¹ *Revolt on the Clyde*, pp. 251-5.

² E.C.C.I. resolutions to this effect were on August 10 and 20, 1920—see *Communist*, December 2, 1920.

feelings of individual leaders who had something of a vested interest in their own particular groups.

Secondly, the Communist International, with all its authority, was urging the final merger of all Marxist forces in Britain into a single Communist Party and, on the two main tactical issues, had suggested, again with all its authority, the line adopted by the London Unity Convention of parliamentary activity and affiliation to the Labour Party.

The first phase of the new unity negotiations took place *inside* those groups that still remained outside the C.P.G.B.

When Gallacher returned to Britain at the end of September 1920, he found that a Communist Labour Party (C.L.P.) had been formed a few weeks previously (September 11) from elements of the Scottish Shop Stewards and other Scottish revolutionary groups. A second conference opened in Glasgow on October 2, 1920, with J. R. Campbell in the chair.¹

The delegates included representatives of a number of "Social Committees" (groups for political action formed by shop stewards), some S.L.P. branches, independent Communist groups, and "fraternal" representatives of the official S.L.P. and of the C.P. (B.S.T.I.). There was in the meeting a strong nationalist feeling that the revolutionary spirit had its centre in Scotland, not with "the London gang", and there was a strong anti-parliamentarian and anti-Labour Party trend. The majority, however, wanted unity.

There was discussion of the possibility of developing the C.L.P. as a new Communist Party in opposition to the C.P.G.B. but after a powerful (though unofficial) intervention from Gallacher reporting the discussions and decisions of the Communist International, a compromise was accepted by which the C.L.P. should continue to bring together the Scottish Communist groups into a single organisation, while at the same time opening negotiations with the C.P.G.B. for a single Communist Party for the whole of Britain. The opposing advice of the S.L.P. and C.P. (B.S.T.I.) delegates was brushed aside, and a Provisional Executive elected with J. V. Leckie as Chairman, Alec Geddes of Greenock, Treasurer, and John MacLean of Bridgwater,² Secretary, and W. Gallacher, co-opted in an advisory capacity, with open mandate.

¹ W. Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*. Communist Labour Party leaflet of October 2, 1920, reporting Conference of C.L.P.

² Not to be confused with John Maclean, leader of the Clyde battles during the war.

This widened the path for bringing the revolutionary section of the Scottish shop stewards into the united Communist Party.

The self-styled C.P. (B.S.T.I.) held its "National Inaugural Conference" at Gorton, Manchester, on September 18-19, 1920, and, having heard a report from Sylvia Pankhurst on the Second Congress of the Communist International, formally decided "to join the Conference proposed by the Executive of the Third International". It elected its National Committee with E. T. Whitehead as Secretary, T. J. Watkins as Treasurer and Sylvia Pankhurst as Editor of the *Workers' Dreadnought*.¹ A further conference, held at Cardiff on December 4-5, 1920, ratified by 15 to 3 the theses and resolutions of the Second Communist International Congress and elected its delegates for the unity negotiations.

Whilst the C.P. (B.S.T.I.) thus had given *formal* support for a united party, part of it (if so small an organisation could have parts), under Sylvia Pankhurst, was at the same time doing its best to organise an anti-parliamentarian bloc within the new party. As late as January 15, 1921, only a fortnight before the Leeds Convention, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote in the *Workers' Dreadnought* advising the formation of a "left bloc" which "should have its own conveners, and its own special sittings prior to the Party Conference, to decide its policy," and with the *Dreadnought* as an "independent organ" giving an "independent support to the Communist Party from the Left Wing standpoint."²

The official S.L.P. despite continuous approaches from the C.P.G.B. and then from the Unity Committee, remained consistently opposed to every form of unity negotiation. Its most active mass workers, propagandists and theoreticians had already joined the C.P.G.B.; others were associated with the C.L.P. in Scotland. What remained was a sectarian group glorying in its self-imposed isolation, fulminating in the fading columns of *The Socialist* against communist unity.³

The C.P.G.B., at its Executive meeting of October 9-10, 1920, discussed the report of the Second Congress of the Communist International and the International's call for a further convention to embrace all those who had to date remained outside,⁴ and decided to give its full support to the further unity negotiations.

In the course of October-November it contacted the leaders of the

¹ *Workers' Dreadnought*, October 2, 1920.

² *Ibid.*, January 15, 1921.

³ See printed Minutes of N.E.C. of S.L.P. August 14-15 and November 27-28, 1920 and January 15-16, 1921, and *The Socialist*.

⁴ *Communist*, October 14, 1920.

various groups concerned, and, on November 15, 1920, a circular letter was published over the signature of Albert Inkpin (C.P.G.B.), Jack Leckie (C.L.P.), E. T. Whitehead (C.P. (B.S.T.I.)) and George Peet (National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement) announcing the calling of a unity meeting for the following December.¹

On December 11-12 this meeting was held with C.P.G.B., C.L.P., and C.P. (B.S.T.I.) officially represented, N.S.S. and W.C.M. in a consultative and the left-wing group of the I.L.P. in an informative capacity. The three fully-represented organisations agreed to reaffirm their support for the Statutes and Theses of the Communist International, to merge into a united Communist Party, and fixed the venue of the new Unity Convention as Leeds, January 29-30, 1921.²

At further meetings in January (January 8 and 16) 1921, the details were agreed for representation, voting and election of the leadership at Leeds.³ Representation was to be on the basis of one delegate for the first 25 members and a further one for each additional 25. Independent local Communist groups were to be admitted providing they agreed to accept the Statutes of the Communist International, to abide by the findings of the Convention, and to merge into its branches after the new party was established. Voting was to be on the basis of one vote for every 25 represented, with proxy voting permitted. The new Provisional Executive Committee was to be formed on the basis of three from the C.P.G.B., two each from C.L.P. and C.P. (B.S.T.I.) and ten elected by the Convention on a geographical basis (Scotland 2, Wales 2, North of England 3, South of England 3). The Chairman was to be elected by Congress, and the Secretary appointed by the Executive from outside its membership. Everything was ready for Leeds.

LEEDS CONVENTION (JANUARY 29-30, 1921)

Compared with the London Unity Convention of six months before. Leeds was calm and businesslike. The main political issues—strategical and tactical, long term and short term—had been decided in advance. All that remained was the formal merger.

One hundred and twenty delegates, representing branches of the C.P.G.B., C.L.P., C.P. (B.S.T.I.) and of various independent groups,

¹ *Ibid.*, December 2, 1920.

² *Ibid.*, December 16, 1920.

³ *Ibid.*, January 13 and 20, 1921.

assembled at the Victory Hotel, Leeds, with Jack Tanner of the Shop Stewards in the chair.¹

The report of the Unity Committee was put and unanimously accepted. E. H. Brown from the left-wing group of the I.L.P. greeted the Congress, explaining that his group had decided to remain for the present inside the I.L.P., where great discussions were in progress, until its future (and the question of affiliation to the Communist International) was decided at its Easter Conference. J. T. Murphy for the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement greeting the unification, stated that his organisation, though not officially merging into the Communist Party (the Shop Stewards was a broad body containing workers of different outlooks, and had a role outside and of a different order from the C.P.), had played a positive part in the unity negotiations, and said that most of its leading members would be in the new Party.

W. Gallacher of the C.L.P. moved the formal motion for the merger. "In the past", he said, "each section had seemed more anxious to impress . . . with its own revolutionary fervour than to get together with other sections and do something really valuable . . . we had failed in the past because so many of us had been too much concerned with personalities rather than with principles."

The Convention then unanimously adopted a resolution merging the C.P.G.B., the C.L.P., the C.P.(B.S.T.I.) and other independent groups into a single united Communist Party, and declared its acceptance of the Statutes, Theses and conditions of affiliation of the Communist International.

The Convention heard with enthusiasm a Communist International representative (a Norwegian) and a greeting from the newly established Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.).

A preliminary discussion, opened by Tom Bell, took place on future work and organisation, and it was agreed that, following the Convention, Divisional (area) meetings of members should be held in different parts of the country to set up Divisional (area) Councils linked with the Executive Committee which would co-ordinate activity throughout the country. The *Communist* was adopted as the official organ of the new Party which kept the name of the Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.). Provisional Rules and Constitution were adopted.

¹ Reports of Leeds Convention in *Communist*, February 5, 1921. Agenda and resolutions in leaflet *United C.P.—Communist Unity Organisation Committee*, of January 1921.

The Provisional Executive Committee was elected with J. F. Hodgson, W. Mellor and A. A. Watts from the C.P.G.B., J. W. Leckie and J. MacDonald from the C.L.P., R. Beech and E. T. Whitehead from the C.P. (B.S.T.I.). From the areas elected by the Convention, were—for Scotland, John Maclean and W. Kirker; for Wales, T. Watkins and W. J. Hewlett; for North of England, J. T. Murphy, W. Paul and Harry Webb; for South of England, F. L. Kerran, Mrs. D. B. Montefiore and J. J. Vaughan—a total of 20 members with Arthur MacManus elected as Chairman, and Albert Inkpin, later, appointed Secretary.

All groups of British Marxists of any influence apart from the Left-Wing Group still working within the I.L.P.¹ had merged their identity into a single united Communist Party of Great Britain. The long and complex negotiations had been brought to a successful conclusion.

First Balance Sheet

The first step had been taken. From the different revolutionary groups, societies and trends had been forged a single Communist Party, a Marxist revolutionary party with an agreed general approach and accepted tactics. The preparations had been long, and at times extremely difficult. The working class owes very much to those pioneers like J. F. Hodgson, Albert Inkpin, Arthur MacManus and Tom Bell who kept the negotiations from breaking, and learned how to subordinate their own personal associations with particular groups to loyalty to the prime need of a united party.

How can we summarise the stage reached, the balance of achievement and weakness, reached at the time of the conclusion of the Leeds Convention?

The formation of the Communist Party represented an historical step of the greatest importance, a substantial gain for the British working-class movement.

(a) The Marxist groups, for nearly 70 years divided, turned in on themselves, each with its own personal and group loyalties, were now united into a single Party with a common approach and common tactics.

(b) This Party put before the British working class an alternative to the opportunism and reformism that had led them again and again to defeat. It put before them a scientific understanding of the struggle for

¹ See next chapter.

socialism—Marxism. Against the acceptance of the capitalist state it put the struggle of the working class for political power. Against the reformist doctrine of class-collaboration it put the need for class struggle. It made no promises of easy victory, but showed the only road to the successful achievement of socialism, the revolutionary road through the struggle of the working people led by the working class, in their turn led by a revolutionary Communist Party.

(c) This Party had begun, though *only* begun, to recognise the dangers of dogmatism, of dead doctrinaire “socialism”, of sectarian isolation from the mass of the working class and its organisations. It had accepted tactics of parliamentary activity and links with the Labour Party, breaking with the worst sectarian traditions of the socialist sects.

(d) The new Party was part of the Communist International, led by Lenin; it accepted the need for proletarian internationalism, the international solidarity of the working class. In this framework, it could both begin to make its own contribution more effectively to the international movement and benefit from the experience of the working-class movement throughout the world, above all of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, first to lead its country to the defeat of capitalism.

(e) The Communist Party was not in any sense a foreign creation. It arose out of long struggles within Britain, answering the needs of the British working class.

It was the heir of a long tradition that dated from the revolutionary radicals of the 1790's and was continued in the militant wing of the Chartist movement. In a sense the Corresponding Societies of the 1790's and, still more, the National Charter Association of the 1840's were steps in the long march towards a revolutionary working-class party.

The Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League of the 1880's were another step forward. Their formation meant that definite *Marxist* working-class organisations had come into existence in Britain. With the turn of the century the Socialist Labour Party (S.L.P.) was founded. And the S.D.F., the most important of the Marxist groups, became the Social Democratic Party (S.D.P.) and then was broadened into the British Socialist Party (B.S.P.).

With the bitter experience of World War I, with the inspiration of the October 1917 Revolution, and with the sharp lessons of slump and the stormy post-war years, the situation shouted aloud for a merger of British revolutionary forces.

The Communist Party of Great Britain, continuing all that was best

in the militant tradition of the British radical and working-class movement, was formed to meet that need.

Against this it is necessary to note that in the new Party, just formed, there were still many and great weaknesses:

(a) Unity had been achieved, a single revolutionary organisation established, a common tactic adopted, but that did not by any means signify that unity of view was as yet solidly established. Majority decisions had been taken, but conviction was not yet reached. Within the single Party, to an extent, different trends and approaches continued to exist and conflict with one another.

(b) The C.P.G.B. accepted Marxism, and looked to Lenin as the great world leader of the international working class. It stood for a revolutionary path to socialism, for the dictatorship of the proletariat. But it was still in many ways only on the surface of the understanding of Marxism-Leninism, and education in Marxism was confined to a few of its members. It had inherited much that was dogmatic, abstract and not truly Marxist in its theoretical approach. There were tendencies to see the collapse of capitalism and building of socialism as an inevitable process, not dependent on the *struggle* of the working class and above all, on the leadership of the Communist Party; there was not a deep understanding of the relation of the mass struggles on immediate issues to the revolutionary struggle for political power; there was little understanding as yet of the nature of imperialism, its effect on the Labour Movement, and the duties of the British working class towards the colonial struggles. There was as yet but little attempt to apply the general approach of Marxism to the particular conditions of Britain.

(c) Although the new Party had accepted the line of mass activity, parliamentary activity, affiliation to the Labour Party, it was still rather isolated from the mass of the workers. It was small in size, had its main strength in a few industrial areas—London, South Wales, Scotland and Lancashire—had only slight links in a number of large areas, and but few roots in the trade unions and factories.

(d) The new Party had inherited its organisational form from the earlier socialist groups. Its branches were still the old type of propagandist group, loosely bound by a co-ordinating centre, itself based on representatives of different trends and different geographical areas. It was not yet in any sense the centralised or disciplined Party necessary for revolutionary struggle. It was a Party with a new role and as yet an old type of organisation.

Lenin had always understood that to build a revolutionary party in the heart of world imperialism was a task of peculiar difficulty. It meant raising the need for revolutionary change in a country where the bourgeoisie was of surpassing cunning in confusing the working class, a class with long experience of combining physical brutality with flattery and concession, a class not only with a powerful state machine for direct oppression (armed force, Secret Service, police, etc.), but with a gigantic machine for inculcation of capitalist ideas for the mass of the working class (school text-books, press, publishing houses, cinemas, theatres, etc.).

It meant raising the revolutionary banner in a country where reformism was deeply entrenched in the working-class movement, where most of the key positions of the labour movement were in reformist hands.

To form in such a country a Communist Party, and to build it up into a strong party was, of course, a difficult task.

A long and difficult journey lay ahead, but the first step had been taken.

CHAPTER I—APPENDIX I

LENIN'S LETTER TO TOM BELL

(The letter below is reproduced exactly as written in English by Lenin)

To the comrade Thomas Bell

(Lux 154)

Dear comrade,

I thank you very much for Your letter, (d[ated] 7/8. I have read nothing concerning the english movement last months because of my illness & overwork.

It is extremely interesting what You communicate. Perhaps it is *the beginning* of the real proletarian mass movement in great Britain *in the communist sense*. I am afraid we have till now in England few very feeble propagandist societies for communism (inclusive the British Communist Party) but no really *mass* communist movement.

If the South Wales Miners Federation has decided on 24/VII to affiliate to the III. Int.[ernational] by a majority of 120 to 63,—perhaps it is the beginning of new era. (How much miners there are in Eng-

more than 500,000? 25000?

land? how much in South Wales? how much miners were *really* represented in Cardiff 24/VII 1921?).

If these miners are not too small minority, if they fraternise with soldiers & begin a *real* "class war",—we must do all our possible to *develop* this movement & strengthen it.

Economic measures (like communal kitchens) are good but they are not much important *now*, *before* the victory of the proletarian revolution in England. *Now* the *political* struggle is the most important.

English capitalists are shrewd, clever, astute. They *will* support (directly or indirectly) communal kitchens in order to divert the attention *from political aims*.

What is important—is (if I am not mistaken) (1) to create a very good, really proletarian, really mass *communist party* in this part of England,—that is such party which will *really* be the LEADING force in *all* labour movement in this part of the country. (Apply the resolution on organisation & work of the party adopted by the 3 congress to this part of your country).

(2) To start a daily paper of the working class, for the working class in this part of the country.

news

To start it not as a business (as usually papers are started in capitalist countries), not with big sum of money, not in ordinary & usual manner,—but as an *economic & political* tool of the *masses* in their struggle. Either the miners of this district are capable to pay half-penny daily (for the beginning *weekly*, if You like) for their own daily (or weekly) newspaper (be it very small, it is not important) or THERE IS NO BEGINNING of the *really communist mass movement in this part of Your country*.

If the communist party of this district cannot collect few £ in order to publish *small leaflets* DAILY as a beginning of the really *proletarian* communist newspaper—if it so, if *every miner* will not pay a penny for it, then there is *not serious*, not genuine affiliation to the III. Int.[ernational].

English government will apply the shrewdest means in order to suppress every beginning of this kind. Therefore we must be (in the beginning) very prudent. The paper must be *not too revolutionary* in the beginning. If You will have three editors, at least one must be *non communist* (at least two genuine workers). If 9/10 of the workers do not buy this paper, if 2/3 workers (120/120 63) do not pay special

contributions(f.(or) i. (instance) 1 penny *weekly*) for THEIR paper,—it will be no workers' newspaper.

I should be very glad to have few lines from You concerning this theme & beg to apologise for my bad English.

With communist greetings, LENIN¹

¹ This letter was written on August 13, 1921. It was first published on January 21, 1927 in the *Workers' Weekly*, No. 205. A Russian translation appeared in *Pravda*, No. 21 on January 27, 1927.

CHAPTER II

THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN ACTION AUGUST 1920–DECEMBER 1923

Reorganisation of the Party—British Workers Stop War—On the Home Front—Miners' Strike—Black Friday—Engineers' Lock-out—Employers' Offensive June 1922–December 1923—Dock Strike of 1923—British Bureau of R.I.L.U.—Communist Party and the Fight of the Unemployed—The First Hunger March—Foreign Affairs—Russian Famine Campaign—Fight Against War in the Near East—Hands off the Ruhr—Curzon Ultimatum—British Labour and the Ultimatum—Fight against Imperialism—Second Congress of Communist International on Colonial Issue—Communist Party and the Fight for Unity—Communist Party and the I.L.P.—Communist Party and the Labour Party—The Electoral Struggle—Caerphilly By-election—1922 General Election—Communists in the House—Local Elections—Organisation and Reorganisation—First Steps—First Constitution and Rules—Need for a New Type of Organisation—Party Commission and its Report—Carrying out the Party Reorganisation—The Party Press—Young Communist League Founded—The Raids and the Vendetta.

REORGANISATION OF THE PARTY

The period from mid-1920 to the end of 1923 is a stormy period in British working-class history. It starts in August 1920 with the magnificent struggle of the British workers against a reactionary war of intervention. There follows in 1921 and 1922 a period of capitalist offensive and working-class retreat, under a right-wing leadership, and in 1923 the retreat begins to be stemmed and the movement of working-class resistance, of counter-struggle, step by step develops.

Within all this struggle and counter-struggle the newly-formed Communist Party played a very important part. But its role was not even. At first, in the battle against the threat of an anti-Soviet war, its role was very great. In the following period of retreats, its role was courageous but not as effective as it could have been. With the end of 1922 and throughout 1923 its role grew stronger and it became a key

part of the forces of the left that began to stem the retreat and prepare for a counter-offensive.

For the history of the Communist Party cannot be understood separately from the general struggles of the British working class and people. Nor can the contribution that the Party has made towards the struggles be understood separately from its own internal struggles and internal developments.

By August 1920 the Communist Party had been established. In the next three years, however, some difficult problems faced British Communists *inside* the Party as well as in the Party's role in the broad labour movement. Though we treat later the details of Party reorganisation during this period,¹ it is impossible to understand the role and activity of the Party, either on the home industrial front or on issues of world affairs, without taking a first glance at the internal struggles within the Party and the changes in organisation and leadership that resulted from them.

Three Party Congresses² took place (following the two foundation Congresses) during the period 1921-1923. The Third Party Congress was held on April 23-24, 1921, at Manchester; the Fourth Congress on March 18-19, 1922, at St. Pancras, London; and the Fifth Party Congress at Battersea, London, on October 7-8, 1922. The Fourth and Fifth Congresses, or more precisely, the defeat of the old Central Committee at St. Pancras, the decision there to appoint a Commission on Party Organisation from non-members of the Executive, the appointment and the work of that Commission and its long-drawn-out struggle with sections of the old leadership, the enthusiastic endorsement of the Commission's findings and proposals at the Fifth, Battersea Congress, the election of a new Central Committee containing two members of the Commission, R. Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt, and the work throughout the end of 1922 and the whole of 1923 to re-organise the Party along the newly-adopted lines—all this constituted one of the turning points in the life and history of the Communist Party.

The Party had been established at a favourable moment in the history of the British working class, a moment in which revolutionary feelings were strong. But soon after its foundation, with economic

¹ See pp. 196-221 of this chapter.

² At this time the Party sometimes referred to Party "Congresses" sometimes to "Conferences". The words were more or less interchangeable. We stick to Congresses throughout this book.

crisis, rapidly spreading unemployment, disorganisation in the broader trade union movement under capitalist offensive and a disastrous reformist leadership, the position became more complex and less favourable.

Internally problems grew. Towards the end of 1921 and the beginning of 1922 it became increasingly clear to many of the most active members of the Party that all was not well within its own ranks. Membership was falling; Party branches resembled the traditional branches of the socialist propaganda societies or sects; the Party was not participating in the mass struggle with anything like the effectiveness of which it was capable; its organisation remained essentially that of the old type of socialist party; the federally-elected geographically-based leadership was not capable of mobilising the Party nor indeed suitable for a revolutionary Party.

The feeling grew and spread that radical changes would have to be made—changes both in leadership and form of organisation. This feeling was strengthened by the indication of a different method and type of party organisation that had been outlined at the Third Congress of the Communist International (June–July 1921).¹ But the growing demand for a change went deeper than a demand purely for organisational reform.

This growing dissatisfaction within the Party, a feeling that inevitably began to take the form of criticism of the existing Executive Committee (though it was shared by some members of the old leadership, particularly by William Gallacher), came to a head at the Fourth Congress of the Party (St. Pancras, March 18–19, 1922), and expressed itself most clearly in the carrying by 87 to 38 votes (against the old Executive) of an amendment to the leadership's resolution for the establishment of a Commission to examine Party Organisation. The amendment established that the Commission to be appointed would be drawn from *outside* the membership of the Central Committee.

The Commission appointed, consisting of R. Palme Dutt, Harry Pollitt and Harry Inkpin,² were endowed with wide powers which they proceeded to use. They conducted a detailed and almost drastic investigation of the branches, divisions, leadership, Party press, and indeed of every aspect of Party work and organisation. They resisted

¹ *Decisions of the Third Congress of the Communist International*, Communist Party of Great Britain, pp. 29–59.

² Brother of Albert Inkpin.

pressures and difficulties thrown in their way by some of the members of the old leadership, and presented in their Report (which we examine later) to the Fifth Congress many radical proposals that marked a sharp break with the old traditional methods of work of the Socialist clubs and societies, including the end of the federal basis of electing leadership, the election of an Executive at Party Congress, and revolutionary principles of democracy and discipline.¹

The Fifth Congress, Battersea, represented a culmination of this struggle of trends and a victory for those who stood for a radical change. Not only were the Commission's proposals adopted unanimously, but when the new Executive was elected, two of the three Commission members, R. Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt, stood well at the top of the poll.

From Battersea a new revolutionary enthusiasm revived the Party; membership began to rise again; districts were reorganised. The *Workers' Weekly* replaced the old *Communist*, bringing the whole Party closer to the mass struggles of the workers and to the trade unions, and acted now not only as educator but as agitator and organiser, spreading the influence of the Party.

As a result, the Party which, with all its weaknesses, had played a courageous part from the beginning in its effort to stop the retreat in face of the employers' offensive, became a more and more effective centre of the left militant forces which at the end of 1922 and in 1923 began to resist the attacks and lay the basis for a counter-offensive.

Without an understanding of these changes within the Party (which we examine in more detail later) it would not be possible to appreciate a certain fall in the influence of the Party in the 1921-1922 period nor its increasing role and influence in 1923.

Life, however, did not permit the Party on its first foundation the luxury of long organisational discussions before it had to embark into struggle. Indeed, it was born in struggle. And no sooner did it come into existence than it was faced with one of the greatest struggles in the history of the British working class.

DEFEAT OF ANTI-SOVIET INTERVENTION—AUGUST 1920

The British Communist Party was certainly not born to a career of

¹ I was able to have extensive discussion with Harry Pollitt and William Gallacher during the early stages of this book about the appointment and work of the Commission. Later I was able to discuss this in detail with R. Palme Dutt. The interpretation of these discussions is of course my own responsibility.

peace and contemplation. Founded on August 1, 1920, it was faced on the very day of its birth with a major attempt of British capitalism to launch yet another offensive war against the young Soviet Republic.

The militant sections of the British working class, including the organisations that merged into the Communist Party, had already taken their stand against the British Government's attempts to crush the Russian Revolution by armed intervention. The B.S.P., the S.L.P., the W.S.F., in the East End of London, had all fought courageously to bring that intervention to an end and to force the Government to give diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. So, it must not be forgotten, had the *Daily Herald*.¹

A London "Hands Off Russia" Committee was formed on the initiative of London shop stewards at a Conference in January 1919. By the middle of that year a national "Hands Off Russia" Committee had been established and by the autumn of 1919 there were a considerable number of local committees in different parts of the country.

The National Committee was a truly united body of the British working class, without bans and proscriptions, and with the driving force from the side of the militants. Alongside the trade union leaders who served on its leadership (who included A. A. Purcell of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C., a foundation member of the Communist Party, C. T. Cramp of the N.U.R., Alex Gossip, General Secretary of N.A.F.T.A., Fred Shaw and David Kirkwood of the A.S.E., John Hill, General Secretary of the Boilermakers, W. Straker of the Miners' Federation, etc.), there were, amongst the vice-presidents, three men who were also foundation members of the Communist Party—Tom Mann, General Secretary of the A.S.E., George Peet, Secretary of the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement, and William Gallacher of the Clyde Workers' Committee.²

¹ In view of what the *Daily Herald* was later to become it is important to remember the very progressive role it played in these early years. It emerged from its hibernation of nearly four and a half years as a weekly in the spring of 1919 and immediately was met with the same type of boycott and hatred that the *Daily Worker* was to meet eleven years later. It exerted a very wide influence in its daily defence of the Soviet Union, the Red Army, and the building of socialism. In the summer of 1919 it roused the Triple Industrial Alliance to go and threaten Lloyd George with an immediate strike of miners, railwaymen and transport workers unless he persuaded his War Minister, Winston Churchill, to withdraw British troops from Archangel. The *Daily Herald* was very largely responsible for the preparation of public opinion for the formation of the "Hands off Russia" Committee. Many of those writing in it were revolutionary socialists who for the greater part supported or joined the Communist Party on its foundation.

² 1920. Letterhead of "Hands Off Russia" Committee.

The B.S.P. lent Pat Coates, who became the Secretary. Harry Pollitt became its first National Organiser, working from the industrial North.¹ Scores of other future Communist activists, including Arthur MacManus, were amongst its most prominent propagandists, speakers and organisers.

At the end of April 1920 was launched the Polish invasion of Russia, an invasion that was unprovoked but not uninspired.

"The marionettes are in Warsaw, but the strings are pulled from London and Paris" (*Daily Herald*, April 4, 1920).

Once again a powerful movement to halt intervention stirred the British working class, and as before under the leadership of the militants and revolutionaries. The stopping of the *Jolly George*, on May 10, 1920, in which Harry Pollitt personally played an important role, and in which the W.S.F. was particularly active, had stirred the dockers and railwaymen into action, and inspired the whole movement. At the Labour Party Conference at the end of June 1920 (Scarborough) Hodgson of the B.S.P., who at that time was one of the leaders of the struggle for the formation of the Communist Party, moved an addendum to the official resolution (which called for peace with Russia) proposing the immediate summoning of a national conference.

"having for its object the organisation of a general strike that shall put an end once and for all to the open and covert participation of the British Government in attacks on the Soviet Republic . . ."

and which, moreover, recommended:

"that unions should support their members in refusing to do work which directly or indirectly assists hostilities against Russia."

This addendum, opposed, amongst others, by Ernest Bevin, was heavily defeated at the time, but had its effect.

The Polish armies at first rapidly advanced. On June 12 they took Kiev. But at the end of the month they were in headlong retreat from the Ukraine, pursued by Budienny's First Cavalry and other Soviet forces right to the gates of Warsaw, a remarkable military feat which aroused tremendous enthusiasm in the international working-class movement.

The British Government, with its noted "impartiality", had refused

¹ See *Serving My Time*, chapter VI.

to invoke Article 10 of the League of Nations Covenant against the Polish invasion of Russia, but invoked it at once when the Soviet counter-offensive pushed its way back on to Polish territory.¹ On July 12, Great Britain despatched a Note to Russia requesting an immediate armistice and including the phrase:

“... the British Government and its Allies would feel bound to assist the Polish nation to defend its existence with all the means at their disposal.”²

On July 21, Prime Minister Lloyd George spoke in the House of Commons in a language that smacked of war. Orders were despatched to the British fleet in the Baltic, and British troops were used to break a strike of the dockers in Danzig against the landing of munitions for the Poles.³ On that day the national “Hands Off Russia” Committee issued a leaflet under the title *Allies Threat to Russia—Danger of a New War*⁴, condemning the British threats and urging all Trades Councils and local Labour Parties:

“(a) To pass resolutions protesting against the Allies’ promised aid to Poland, and warning the British Government that if it attempts to send men, munitions or money to the aid of Poland, organised Labour can and will resort to direct action to prevent it. . . .

“(b) To hold public meetings of protest, and to submit similar resolutions.”

On August 3, 1920, Lord Curzon, Foreign Secretary, addict of ultimatums, despatched to the Soviet Government a peremptory Note threatening war if the advance of the Red Army was not held. The capitalist press spoke war.

This was the position two days after the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

British Workers stop War

The reaction of the British workers was immediate. On August 5, a Thursday, the Labour Party headquarters made a call (published on August 6) for local demonstrations of protest all over the country. On

¹ S. R. Graubard, *British Labour and The Russian Revolution*, p. 101.

² Commons Debates CXXXII, 1420, 483.

³ Allen Hutt, *Post-War History of the British Working Class*, p. 38.

⁴ H.O.R. leaflet of July 21, 1920.

the same day (the fourth day of its existence) the Communist Party sent out its first circular to Branch Secretaries¹ over the signatures of Arthur MacManus and Albert Inkpin:

"There is no need to remind you of the importance of saving Soviet Russia from the attacks of the capitalist governments. For nearly three years you have worked loyally and well to that end. Your efforts, according to their own admissions, have paralysed the militarists' attempts to crush our Russian comrades, for they realise how deeply 'Hands Off Russia' propaganda has sunk into the minds of the workers.

"But this is a supreme moment for action. War—definite, open, bloody war—in support of the Polish nationalists, is threatened against Russia. The Polish attack was secretly instigated and secretly prepared; the Polish request for an armistice a trick to gain time. . . .

"Comrades, the Government must be told in plain terms that the workers will not have war against Soviet Russia. It is our duty deliberately to advise the workers not only to refuse all service for that purpose, but to oppose it actively.

"The Communist Party, in the first days of its existence, must be worthy of its mission. Let us rise to the height of a great occasion.

"Call meetings in your District to denounce the new war. Wherever meetings have been arranged for the week-end, make them specifically for this object.

"Get into touch with the organised workers in your District, through the Trade Union Branches, Trades Councils, Shop Stewards Committees—everywhere—and urge them immediately to notify the Government that they will not make nor handle munitions, nor volunteer for service, nor be pressed into services, but will actively oppose, by a general strike, the threatened campaign.

"Speak boldly and act quickly. Neglect nothing. On the shoulders of every individual member of the Communist Party rests the fate of Russia at this critical moment. Let every member, therefore, be a missionary for the salvation of Russia, lest we be branded with the infamy of crushing by our apathy the first Socialist Republic, and our own hopes and ideals at the same time."

The first issue of the weekly organ of the Communist Party, the *Communist* (August 5), called on the workers to fight against the

¹ *The Threatened War Against Russia*, C.P. circular of August 5, 1920.

intervention in Russia, and announced a big London rally of the "Hands Off Russia" Committee for the following Sunday in Finsbury Park, with three well-known Communists amongst the speakers.

On Friday, August 6, the Communist Party leadership sent an urgent telegram to 25 main branches putting forward five issues to be raised at all protest meetings and demonstrations.¹

On August 7, a group of Labour Party and trade union leaders, including Ernest Bevin, Margaret Bondfield, J. R. Clynes, C. P. Cramp, Arthur Henderson, George Lansbury, with three Communists, A. A. Purcell, Tom Mann and Robert Williams (of the Transport Workers' Federation), came out with a declaration on the imminent danger of war,² warning

"... the responsible governments, the diplomats, and the various foreign Ministers, that Labour in this country will not co-operate in a war as allies of Poland."

On the same day the Communist Party issued a public call to action, including the proposal that a National Council of Labour should be called to organise the struggle against intervention. This was endorsed at the first meeting of the Provisional Executive of the Communist Party two days later.³

On Sunday, August 8, there were hundreds of meetings all over the country organised by Trades Councils, "Hands Off Russia" Committees, local Labour Parties, Communist Party branches and Labour groups and co-ordinating committees of every type. The *Daily Herald*, for the first time in its history, appeared on a Sunday with the slogan "Not a Man, Not a Gun, Not a Sou!" It contained a Communist Party Manifesto embodying the Five Points issued on August 6.

¹ The Five Points of the August 6 telegrams were embodied in a Communist Party Manifesto, signed by MacManus and Inkpin, which appeared in the special Sunday four-page issue of the *Daily Herald* on August 8, 1920. They were:

- (1) Immediate withdrawal of British warships to home waters from the Baltic and Black Sea.
- (2) Immediate withdrawal of all British troops in Poland.
- (3) Public repudiation by the Government of any support for Poland.
- (4) Immediate arrangement of a General Peace Conference.
- (5) A Central Labour Council to supervise the execution of these demands (two each from the Labour Party E.C., Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. and Triple Alliance; one each from Communist Party and I.L.P.).

The above demands to be supported by direct action.

² *Daily Herald*, August 7, 1920.

³ *Communist*, No. 2, August 12, 1920.

In this militant and stormy atmosphere, on August 9, a special meeting was held of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C., the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party, and a resolution voted, which stated:

"that this Joint Conference . . . feels certain that war is being engineered between the Allied Powers and Soviet Russia on the issue of Poland, and declares that such a war would be an intolerable crime against humanity; it therefore warns the Government that the whole industrial power of the organised workers will be used to defeat this war; that the Executive Committees of affiliated organisations throughout the country be summoned to hold themselves ready to proceed immediately to London for a National Conference: that they be advised to instruct their members to 'down tools' on instructions from the National Conference; and that a Council of Action be immediately constituted to take such steps as may be necessary to carry the above decisions into effect."¹

The Council of Action was organised at once and, on August 10, waited on the Prime Minister. Of the 15 who constituted the Council, two, A. A. Purcell and Robert Williams, were at that time members of the Communist Party. Local Councils of Action began to be formed all over the country. Some were truly representative of all sections of the working class. In others the right wing tried to keep out direct representatives of the Communist Party and different militant groupings, though many Communists were elected on to the committees by local Labour Parties and trade union organisations. Many of the meetings organised locally passed resolutions along the lines of the Communist Five Points.² The Communist Party, on August 10, called on all Communist Party branches to meet at once to discuss both what independent measures they could take to strengthen the fight against British intervention, and how they could do their utmost to strengthen the local Councils of Action, combating any tendencies of the right wing to capitulate, and pressing for their own right of representation.³

On August 13 the National Conference, with 1,044 delegates, met in the Central Hall, Westminster. It voted a resolution which,

¹ Report of the 21st Annual Conference of the Labour Party, 1921, p. 11.

² See for instance report of a meeting at Birmingham (*Birmingham Gazette* August 9, 1920) and at Ashton (*Manchester Guardian*, August 10, 1920).

³ C.P. circular of August 10, 1920.

incidentally, embodied three of the five points originally proposed by the Communist Party, instructing the Council of Action to remain in being until it had made sure of:

- “(1) An absolute guarantee that the armed forces of Great Britain shall not be used in support of Poland, Baron Wrangel, or any other military or naval effort against the Soviet Government.
- “(2) The withdrawal of all British naval forces operating directly or indirectly as a blockading influence against Russia.
- “(3) The recognition of the Russian Soviet Government and the establishment of unrestricted trading and commercial relationships between Great Britain and Russia.”¹

Meetings were being held all over the country. Within a few days over 350 local Councils of Action had been established. In fact, as a result of the militant stand of the British working class, a stand which resulted from the long preparatory work of the militant and revolutionary section, *war on the Soviet Union had been averted*. The Government dared not strike.

The Communist Party continued to work to maintain and strengthen the national and local Councils of Action, to persuade them to fight for peaceful diplomatic and trading relations with Soviet Russia, to keep them in a state of vigilance.² Peaceful relationships had not yet been won, but another war of intervention had been averted.

In face of their defeat by the united strength of the British working class, the Government and some of the right-wing Labour spokesmen tried to pretend *that there had never been* the intention of attacking Russia. Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, hurriedly proclaimed that the Council of Action had found “an open door”. J. L. Garvin wrote in the *Observer*:

“The methods of ‘Labour’ and its Councils of Action, are bombastic, hysterical and ridiculous. What they threaten is to make a revolution in order to force an open door.”³

The *New Statesman*, horrified at the lessons that could be drawn from the victory of militant united direct action, hastened to agree in estimating

“. . . the action taken by British Labour this week in connection

¹ Report of Annual Conference of the Labour Party, 1921, p. 12.

² See *Communist*, August 26 and December 2, 1920; January 22, 1921.

³ The *Observer*, August 15, 1920.

with the Russo-Polish crisis. It is probably true that that action had no influence on the course of events."¹

But even the most right-wing Labour leaders, under the pressure of events and of the militant working-class movement, saw, for a brief moment, the truth, and registered it in speeches that they quickly came to regret and betray. "It was Labour's action that saved us from war," wrote MacDonald. . . . "There was no open door till Labour appeared before it."² "During the past few weeks," proclaimed J. H. Thomas at the T.U.C., "we have gone through what is, perhaps, the most momentous period of the Trade Union and Labour Movement in our long history; a period which found for the first time a united and determined working-class effort to challenge the existing order of parliamentary government."³

The door was *not* open. It was *forced* open by the united strength of the British working class. In fact, as R. Palme Dutt clearly pointed out in the issue of the Party journal that followed the events, it was "an ultimatum and a capitulation".⁴ British capitalism, supported by the capitalist press, prepared for war. The *Daily Telegraph* had declared that we were once again in August 1914. On the evening of Thursday, August 5, posters concerning military and naval preparations began to appear. It was announced that a call was to be made for 200,000 volunteers. An ultimatum was despatched on August 6. On August 8 Russia's pacific reply was pronounced unsatisfactory. On August 9 Labour's ultimatum confronted the ultimatum of the ruling class. On August 10, Lloyd George decided that war had never been intended.

That the British working class could rise to such a height of firmness and action was due, to no small extent, to the preparatory agitation, education and organisation of the militant and revolutionary wing, of which no small part were the groups and individuals that had merged into the Communist Party. The right wing had lost no opportunity to denigrate and slander the October Revolution and the Soviet Republic. They had opposed "direct action". It was the B.S.P., the S.L.P., the "Hands Off Russia" Committee, itself a broad front, moved into action by its militant members, that had prepared the way for the Council of Action.

The B.S.P. addendum to the Resolution of the June 1920 Labour

¹ *New Statesman*, August 14, 1920. ² *Forward*, August 23, 1920.

³ T.U.C. Conference Report, 1920, pp. 62-63.

⁴ R. Palme Dutt, "Who Stopped the War", *Communist*, August 19, 1920.

Party Conference had been rejected on right-wing demand. But it was the B.S.P.'s call that was in fact carried out. The Communist Party already on August 7, 1920 called for a National Labour Conference and put forward five points of action, all of which were in fact put into practice.

The victory of the British working class in August 1920 was a momentous fact in British and international history. It showed what *could* be achieved by a *united* working class ready to *fight* for its demands by *militant* action, including the *strike* weapon on *political* as well as *economic* issues.

The right wing were impelled into action by the strength of the feeling of the movement. They were soon to regret their action, and to repudiate it hotly in theory and in practice. In this most honourable moment of British labour struggle, the young Communist Party played a most honourable role, and when others turned away from this path of struggle the Communist Party remained loyal to it.

ON THE HOME FRONT

With 1920, British working-class organisation reached a high peak. The membership of the trade unions affiliated to the T.U.C. had risen from 4,532,085 at the end of the war, to 6,505,482 in 1920. The growth in members had been accompanied by an important process of trade union amalgamations, as for instance with the transport and general unions, and in building and engineering.

The mass struggles, the new organisational strength, the post-war militant attitudes, had succeeded in squeezing out of capitalism some important gains in the form of improved wages, reduced hours, workshop privileges. But by the end of 1920, this short post-war boom had abruptly ended. The brief honeymoon period of ruling-class concessions was quickly transformed into a period of bitter employers' counter-offensive.

At issue was much more than the defence of temporary post-war gains. A drastic *reduction* in real wages and lowering of general living conditions was on the order of the day.

The first blow in this all-out capitalist offensive was launched (and not by accident) against the strongest and staunchest section of the British working class—the miners.

*The Miners' Strike: September-October 1920*¹

On August 12, 1920, a special Miners' Conference decided by 168 votes to 3 to ballot on strike action. The ballot that was declared on August 31 showed a two-thirds majority for strike.

What lay behind this decision? By mid-1920 the miners were in angry mood. They were bitter because the capitalist class had successfully diverted their struggle for the nationalisation of the mines. All the promises of the Sankey Commission majority, including its support for nationalisation, had come to nothing. The miners had handed over their case to the T.U.C. for action. Two Special Conferences (December 1919 and March 1920) had been organised by the T.U.C. Strike action had been rejected and, in fact, the whole issue shelved. The "Mines for the Nation" campaign had been a fiasco, and "nothing remained of the Sankey Commission save those thick blue volumes of its Reports and Minutes of Evidence".² The right-wing leaders of the T.U.C. had served capitalism well.

But this was not all. The cost of living was rising; the real value of wage packets shrinking. To add insult to injury, amongst the steepest price rises was the cost of household coal.

The miners' strike, therefore, set for September 25, 1920, put forward the double demands of wage increases and reduction in the price of coal. Having decided on strike, the Miners' Federation called, as was their right, on the Triple Alliance for support.

The Communist Party supported the miners from the first days of its formation. "The Communist Party . . . hails with approval the action of the miners and will render what assistance it can", wrote Tom Bell on August 26.³ In its manifesto *To the Revolutionary and Class Conscious Workers of Great Britain* of September 9, it warned that the miners would have to face not only the coalowners but every type of Government intervention. Above all, it stressed that the crying need was for solidarity with the miners, starting with the Triple Alliance:

"We hope and urge that Trade Unionists employed in every section of industry will not be led away by the studied propaganda of abuse and misrepresentation employed to destroy the miners' worthy and commendable effort to determine the price of the commodity for the production of which they are mainly, if not entirely

¹ See R. Page Arnot, *The Miners—Years of Struggle*, chapter 9, pp. 226-278. Allen Hutt, *Post War History of the British Working-Class*, pp. 31-33.

² Allen Hutt, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³ *Communist*, August 26, 1920.

... responsible ... it is the bounden duty of railway workers and transport workers to assist the Miners' Federation in securing the 2/- per day advance in wages and the 14/2d. per ton reduction in the price of domestic coal".¹

But inside the Triple Alliance, however militant the feelings of transport and railway workers, reformism was deeply entrenched, particularly in the leadership of the National Union of Railwaymen. There sat J. H. Thomas, the embodiment of all that was worst in reformism, ready to transform every demand for militant action into a long process of protracted conciliation, never loth to deliberate with the employers, but hating militants like the plague. The Triple Alliance leaders, despite pressure from their members, were unwilling to support the strike, and sought to effect a compromise. The Miners' Federation, isolated, called back their strike notices and returned to negotiation. From the coalowners and the Government they got no concessions, but instead a subtle counter-proposal—the famous Datum Line terms—that offered wage increases in proportion to increases in production of coal—in other words, intensification of labour.

The miners agreed to ballot these terms, and the ballot rejected them decisively by a 3 to 1 majority. A Special Miners' Conference on October 14 agreed by 154 to 27 that work should cease as from October 16, but now with the demand on coal prices withdrawn. On October 16, a million miners went on strike. But they went on strike *alone*, and in an atmosphere of retreat.

In its "Open Letter to Miners",² the Communist Party criticised the withdrawal on the price demand and the tendency to retreat. But, above all, it directed its fire against the right-wing leaders of the Triple Alliance. The Government, it explained, was endeavouring to divide the working class and, in the first place, to isolate the miners, the most militant section of the British workers:

"the Miners' Federation is the vanguard of British Trade Unionism, and a defeat of the vanguard affects the whole movement ... the miners' defeat will be felt throughout the whole movement. ..."

The Party called on the miners to reject the Datum Line proposals, to carry through their strike, and appealed to other sections, especially in transport and on the railways, to rally to their support.³

¹ *Communist*, September 9, 1920.

² *Communist*, October 7, 1920.

³ *Communist*, October 7, 1920.

The strike began, a million miners solid throughout the coalfields. The weakness lay within the miners' leadership and, above all, within the leadership of their allies. Pressed by their members from below, the N.U.R., at a Delegate Conference, decided to support the miners unless their terms had been granted or negotiations resumed by October 23. But the damage has been done; the decision was too late. New negotiations *did* begin and, though a further ballot of the miners showed a small majority for maintaining the strike, it was too small, and the leadership too unwilling, to continue. On November 4 work was resumed, on a *temporary* agreement, relating wage increases to increased production, and valid only until March 1921.

It was clear that this was a temporary truce and, on the side of the Government and employers, an armed truce *of which every moment would be used to prepare for the coming battle*. Using the strike as a pretext the Government put through the Emergency Powers Act (E.P.A.), which became law on October 29, permitting the Government, on declaration of an emergency, to use an *open* dictatorship usually reserved for war, and of the type enacted in the Napoleonic Wars and during World War I. The Government lost no time in preparing for the next round.

On November 11 the Communist Party summed up the lessons of the strike.¹ The struggle had shown the militant feeling of the workers. The miners wanted to fight, had rejected the Datum Line. The railway workers were ready to support them. But in the miners' leadership was a section ready to retreat, who had gone backwards into battle with retreat as their objective. Above all, the betrayal came from the right-wing leaders of the Thomas type. What had been secured was a "patched-up" peace. The Government was already preparing for the next conflict. The miners must, on their side, prepare, and above all the "lesson of solidarity" must be learned.

Already in this preliminary skirmish on the home front there could be seen emerging the line-up of forces, the character of the struggle that was to typify the coming conflict.

First, the capitalists. Ably led, with all the cunning of Lloyd George, preparing a major counter-offensive against working-class conditions; their tactics—to divide the workers, take on industries one by one, using when necessary temporary concessions, and when necessary threats and violence. Their ally, the reformist leaders inside the Labour and trade union movement.

¹ *Communist*, November 11, 1920. "The Coal Settlement—A Patched-up Peace".

Second, the reformist leaders. From below, the workers were militant, ready for action, but they lacked political clarity. For victory they needed determination in struggle, unity of the different trades, trade unions and sections of the labour movement, a clear picture of the road ahead. Reformism offered them conciliation, disunity and, in essence, a confused picture of reformed capitalism. It confused and divided the workers, and led them inevitably to retreat and defeat.

Third, the militant forces ready to struggle. There were many such forces, above all in the branches of the trade unions, in the local sections of the Independent Labour Party, and Labour Party. Typical in their militancy were the lodges of the miners and some of the miners' leaders. But the only section that could see the position as a whole was the Communist Party, fighting for the militant stand of the miners, for working-class solidarity, for an *effective* Triple Alliance, and, after retreat, for full preparation for the inevitable conflict ahead.

The Communist Party was still too small and lacked a sufficient basis among the workers to play a decisive part in this, its first battle on home affairs. It had another weakness, which it is important to understand. The reformists promised socialism through a process of gradual reform within capitalism; they called for conciliation with the capitalist class. The Communist Party had not only to raise the banner of militant struggle on immediate issues, but to show that the real solution could not be found within capitalism, but only with a change of political power, in a socialist society.

At this stage of its propaganda the Communist Party leadership felt it necessary, in every manifesto, in every declaration, on each immediate struggle, to draw the lesson of the need for revolutionary political change. It was, of course, correct for the Party to explain to militant miners that only under socialism would there be a real and lasting solution for the pits. But the introduction of revolutionary demands for social change in every declaration often weakened the effect of these declarations on those workers who were not yet ready for revolutionary solutions, and often tended to make them feel that *nothing useful* could be achieved through immediate struggle. This was a sectarian mistake, a legacy of the past, particularly of the old type of approach of the Socialist Labour Party.

But whilst it is necessary to note these weaknesses, it is equally necessary to understand that the Communist Party played a most honourable role in this its first struggle on the industrial front and

was, indeed, with all its weaknesses, the main voice of fighting leadership. The work of the Party stiffened the resistance of the militant workers, raised the banner of "No Retreat", exposed the capitalist aim of dividing the working class, showed the role played by Thomas and the reformists, and after the temporary truce called on the miners to prepare for the coming battles. The warnings and calls of the Party were all too soon proven correct.

Black Friday: April 1921¹

The October agreement was a truce. On the side of capitalism (Government and coalowners) it was a truce to prepare for war. By summer 1920 the post-war boom was already at an end. By winter, the position was growing grim, trade shrinking, unemployment rising fast. By March 1921 more than one in nine of all insured workers were without work. Capitalism could delay no longer. The offensive was launched, and that meant an offensive in the first place against the miners. Mining was the key industry in British economy, and the miners the key section of the British Labour movement.

The temporary agreement was due to end on March 31, 1921, and by that time, in theory, a new long-term agreement would have been negotiated. The miners, on their side, put forward moderate terms—a National Wages Board to regulate wages and profits; a new 1921 standard wage; a National Profits Pool to even out the position from district to district. But capitalism was not interested in a moderate improvement of miners' conditions, and a two-sided attack was launched with Government and coalowners in close collusion.

The coalowners wanted an end to all *national* wage agreement and the return to the old system of district agreements (they wanted not only to divide the miners from other sections of the working class, but to split the miners amongst themselves), and instead of wage increases, drastic wage reductions.

The Government, early in 1921, let it be known that they intended to *decontrol* coal prices and distribution on March 1, and by March 31 completely to decontrol the coal industry. This meant, in one fell swoop, sweeping away all the earlier gains—the "war wage" of 3s. a shift, the "Sankey wage" of 2s., the 20 per cent gained eleven months previously. Legislative measures for decontrol were raced through,

¹ For background to "Black Friday" see: R. Page Arnot, *The Miners—Years of Struggle*, chapter 10, pp. 278-331. Allen Hutt, *Post War History of the British Working-Class*, pp. 57-62.

and on March 24, 1921, the Coal Mines (Decontrol) Bill became law. The coalowners had, meanwhile, posted notices early in March that, as from the end of the month, all contracts of services would end. Each District Association put forward its own terms, mostly involving drastic wage reductions, some almost 50 per cent. As Herbert Smith declared from the chair of a Special Miners' Conference on March 24, this was a declaration of war. The miners replied that *all* notices should be allowed to expire regardless of occupation. All engineers, pumpmen, all concerned in maintaining the pits would cease work, alongside the pit men. On April 1 over one million miners were locked out.

The Communist Party warned and warned again. The *Communist* wrote on March 5, 1921, that the employers were preparing a general offensive against the living standards of the whole working class, beginning with the miners.¹ The miners should not rely on the trade union leaders:

"In every pit, in every District, throughout the country, they should begin now to organise for the struggle that is coming."²

The Provisional Executive Committee of the Communist Party, meeting on April 2/3, 1921, took steps to mobilise the whole membership to rally to the miners' support, to prepare and distribute leaflets calling for solidarity with the miners, to issue special leaflets to the unemployed, to defeat attempts at organising blacklegs for use against the miners, the latter a most important measure in view of the large number of miners unemployed. The Party's slogan was *Solidarity with the Miners*. Above all, the Communists explained to other sections of the workers that the miners' fight was *their* fight, that the defeat of the miners would let loose a general onslaught on living conditions of the working class as a whole.

Thus battle was joined. But what a difference between the mobilisation on the two sides of the struggle! The capitalists were solid and determined.³ The Emergency Powers Act, passed precisely for this purpose five months earlier, was brought into operation; the State of Emergency was declared. On April 4, the Government moved troops into the coalfields. On April 5, the War Office cancelled all leave. On April 6, London parks began to be used as armed camps. On April 8, Army and Navy Reservists were called up, and a new volunteer "Defence Force" was announced in which men would be enrolled for 90 days. A tremendous press campaign was launched

¹ *Communist*, March 5, 1921.

² *Ibid.*

³ See R. Page Arnot, *op. cit.*

against the "callous" miners, who ignored the interests of the community, who would even in their heartlessness let the pit ponies starve.

On their side the miners' mood was militant, millions of workers, starting with the railwaymen and transport workers, were ready to move in their support. But within the leaderships there was, from the beginning, weakness and betrayal. The miners had appealed, before the lock-out, to the Triple Alliance. On April 8, a full Triple Alliance Conference agreed that strike action in support of the miners should begin on midnight, April 12. This done, the following day, N.U.R. and Transport Workers' Federation leaders met the Government, and consented to use their influence with the miners to secure the return of the pumpmen. The first crack appeared. The miners, under pressure, began negotiations with the Government, and using this, the N.U.R. and T.W.F. leaders postponed the strike from April 12. On April 13, the full Triple Alliance again fixed their strike for April 15, but . . . in key positions of the workers' camp were allies of the capitalists.

At meetings, factory gates, rail depots, in the mining villages, wherever there were Communists, the warning was sounded. The tragedy was that there were not enough. The Communist Party published on April 9 a special number of the *Communist* under the slogan of "Watch Those Leaders".¹ It warned, not just in general, but listed by name those who should be watched:

"Hodges has reiterated time and again since the lock-out began, that the mining industry is bankrupt, and, therefore, less money must be paid to the miners; Bevin has secretly and unknown to the rank-and-file of his union offered to accept a reduction for the chemical trade; Thomas lives in a world where only his responsibility matters; Havelock Wilson² continues to betray his class every time and all the time. . . ."

The Party warned that treachery was afoot from within, that reformism would act as the agent and sustainer of capitalism. And once again the warning proved not without foundation.

On the night of Thursday, April 14, eve of the Triple Alliance sympathetic strike, Frank Hodges, Secretary of the Miners' Federation, addressed a meeting of Members of Parliament in the Committee Rooms of the House of Commons. It was reported that he was *prepared for a temporary settlement on a District basis*. On the morning of

¹ *Communist*, April 9, 1921.

² Leader of the National Union of Seamen.

April 12, the Prime Minister wrote to Hodges calling for a new meeting between miners and mineowners *on that basis*.

It is true that the Miners' Executive repudiated Hodges. But Hodges' action was enough for the other reformist leaders of the Triple Alliance. J. H. Thomas was able to stampede the conference of N.U.R., A.S.L.E.F. and T.W.F., who agreed that the miners should return to negotiation, and the sympathetic strike was called off. The miners were left alone. The camp of the workers was split, and that Friday was indeed black. Ernest Bevin, at the conference of the T.W.F. held in June 1921, was to declare that if he were to live Black Friday over again he would repeat his action. Havelock Wilson¹ boasted that April 15 should be known as "Glorious Friday".

It is not always a pleasure to be proved correct. The Communist Party warning had, alas, been well founded:

"The disaster that we feared has overtaken the Labour movement . . . but there is an even more terrible danger facing us than the disaster itself, and that is, that we shall fail to recognise the causes of that disaster."²

The Party, therefore, tried to draw the lesson. What was needed was class solidarity and class struggle. Reformism meant class-conciliation, unity with the capitalists instead of unity of the working class. Above all, the workers must rely on their own strength, reinforce and organise the militant movement from below, get rid of the reformist leaders:

"What is the basic weakness in the whole movement . . .? It is that the movement, while it could only exist as a fighting machine, is directed by leaders who do not want to fight. . . .

"These leaders must go."³

The Communist Party set the example of what was necessary. Robert Williams, Secretary of the Transport Workers' Federation, was a foundation member of the Communist Party, but for the role he had played in the betrayal of Black Friday he was expelled from the Party.

The Third Congress of the Communist Party met at Manchester a week after Black Friday. It approved the expulsion of Robert Williams

¹ *Daily Herald*, June 10, 1921.

² *Communist*, April 23, 1921, article by R. Palme Dutt.

³ *Ibid*.

and unanimously adopted a resolution of solidarity with the miners as the first point on its agenda.¹ This Congress, it proclaimed:

"declares its whole-hearted sympathy with the mining workers, who were so treacherously abandoned by the leaders of the Transport Workers and Railwaymen, and congratulates them on their steadfastness in the face of the failure of their allies. It calls upon the rank and file, who were no party to this betrayal, to drive their betrayers from official positions, and . . . to prepare against a repetition of this disaster by reorganising the union on a class basis and with a class war policy."

The miners did, in fact, remain steadfast and on strike. A ballot of June 17, 1921, showed a rejection of the terms of Government and coalowners by 434,614 to 180,724. The Emergency Powers Act was kept in force and the Government launched a virtual police terror against the striking miners and again the Communist Party as the most active protagonists of militant struggle:

"the struggle had to be conducted under conditions of government repression as had scarcely been known since well-nigh a century earlier."²

After three months' struggle the miners returned to work, defeated but united.

The Engineering Lock-out—March-June 1922³

The post-war advance of the trade union movement was well reflected in the very rapid advance of the organisation of the engineers. The immediate post-war years saw some striking successes—wage increases, shorter hours, some improvements in working conditions. Above all, on July 1, 1920, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (A.E.U.) was established, and gave high hope of further advance. The first month of its existence showed fresh successes. In September 1920, the Overtime and Night Shift Agreement for the first time fixed overtime for the whole country, and limited systematic overtime to 30 hours per month. On March 10, the Industrial Court, acting as an arbitration tribunal, met a wage claim for 15s. on the basic rate by a rise of 6s. on the war bonus. But a further wage demand (6d. an hour) was refused by the Industrial Court at the end of June 1920. The climate was changing.

¹ Ibid., April 30, 1921.

² R. Page Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

³ For background see: James Jeffreys, *The Story of the Engineers*, chapter 9, pp. 217-233. *Communist*, April 15, 1922, "Stand by the A.E.U."

The brief post-war boom had turned to post-war depression. The employers were organising for battle. By 1922 over 2,000 firms had joined the Engineering Employers' Federation. Unemployment was weakening the union. From December 1920–July 1921, A.E.U. unemployment rose from 19,976 to 114,684. Capitalist concession was transformed first to stone-walling and standstill and then into a major employers' offensive.

Inconclusive wage negotiations continued during the second half of 1920, but by March 1921, the Federated Employers had made clear their intention not only of refusing wage increases, but of *reducing* wages by 6s. a week for those on time rates, of cutting piece work prices by 15 per cent, and of withdrawing the 12½ per cent and 7½ per cent bonuses conceded in 1917 and 1918. Further meetings were held with the A.E.U., more meetings with the representatives of all the engineering unions (Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Unions, with 35 unions and societies; Federation of General Workers, with 12 unions; National Union of Foundry-workers); two ballots were held; but by September 1921, the unions had retreated and the engineering workers lost wages to the extent of £50 millions per year.

Alongside the employers' attack on wages came a full-scale offensive against working conditions—overtime, manning of machines, rights of apprentices, etc. The September 1920 agreement had laid down for overtime conditions that would apply "when overtime is necessary".

But *who* was to decide when it should be necessary? Employers or unions? The employers demanded exclusive right to decide and, in April 1921, threatened to lock out on this issue all A.E.U. members in the federated shops. The miners' struggle was not yet ended, and the engineers' war chest was still relatively full.

But with the miners defeated, unemployment rising steeply, and the victories on wage cuts of July and September 1921, the employers returned to the attack.

The Communists had been warning of the coming offensive throughout 1921; they had warned of the danger of constant retreat by the trade union leaders, called for the vigilance of all workers in the engineering trade.

With the employers' offensive, the weaknesses of which the Communist Party had so often warned began to be revealed. In November 1921, faced with something like an ultimatum from the employers on "Managerial Rights", especially on overtime, the A.E.U. leadership *recommended acceptance*—a first considerable retreat. True, in

January 1922, a membership ballot rejected this recommendation, but much harm had already been done. The employers were encouraged and posted notices in all federated shops that as from March 11, 1922, no employment would be available for members of the A.E.U. The obvious aim was to isolate the A.E.U. from the other sections of the engineering trade union movement.

The Communist Party began with all its available strength to campaign along four main lines:

1. Against all and every retreat.
2. Let the rank and file watch their leaders, and themselves organise for the fight.
3. Full solidarity of every section of the engineering trade—let the 47 unions support the A.E.U.
4. Solidarity of the whole labour movement with the engineers.

On March 11 the lock-out began. The *Communist* of that date¹ and of the following week² called on the engineers to set up Lock-Out Committees in every locality and to make contact with the unemployed. It also called on the unemployed to show their solidarity with the engineering workers (the employers were hoping that from the 100,000 unemployed engineers would come the necessary blacklegs to break the ranks). It called for a Special Congress of the T.U.C.—an *All-in Labour Congress*—to concert solidarity with the engineers:

“We have reached a most critical hour. The employers smashed into the miners to destroy the idea of *national* control. They have selected the engineers to destroy every vestige of control of *factory* conditions.”³

The Communist Party had appealed to the Labour leaders to call an All-In Congress to support the engineers. The leaders, in fact, did precisely the opposite. The National Joint Council of Labour (representing the Labour Party, Parliamentary Labour Party and T.U.C.) offered to act as *mediators* and produced towards the end of March 1922 a memorandum as a basis for discussion that was almost identical with the employers’ ultimatum of November 1921. When this was rejected, the National Joint Council, led by Arthur Henderson, produced new proposals along the same lines, that were again rejected by the A.E.U. The National Joint Council, as the Communist Party pointed out,⁴

¹ *Communist*, March 11, 1922.

³ *Ibid.*, March 4, 1922.

² *Ibid.*, March 18, 1922.

⁴ *Ibid.*, April 15, 1922.

represented the interests of the employers far more than those of the engineers, weakened A.E.U. resistance, and threw in a wedge between the A.E.U. and the other engineering unions.

The Communist Party called for solidarity:

“... the rank and file must rally to the A.E.U. In your branches hold meetings, in your workshops pass resolutions, by every means available press the District officials, the District Executive, the National Executive.

“There is still time for the 47 unions to be brought round and made to stand firm. . . .

“There is still time for the rank and file Congress to be held and for the Special T.U.C. Congress to follow it.”¹

The lock-out continued, and, finally on May 2, extended to the other engineering unions. On May 10, the (impartial!) Court of Enquiry, set up by the Ministry of Labour, came down in support of the employers.

Despite the weakness in all the high places the rank and file of the A.E.U. fought with great courage. Everywhere there were large meetings, Lock-Out Committees, few desertions despite increasing hunger. As the employers had calculated, funds were soon running low. At its foundation, in July 1920, the A.E.U. fund was in the region of £3,250,000. By the end of May 1922, only some £32,500 were left. Communists and other militants were collecting funds, but their resources were relatively weak. Those who, like the National Joint Council, could have organised substantial financial aid, were busy mediating. The employers had counted on starving out the engineers, counted on the corruption of hunger.

An Organising District Delegate of the A.E.U. wrote in his monthly report:

“Herod was a gentleman compared with some of the people whom I know, and whom you will see, walking with a Bible under their arms on a Sunday, but on Monday, rubbing their hands with satisfaction when they think that some member of the A.E.U. is going to be forced back to work through the weary and careworn face of his wife and the pleadings of his children.”²

¹ April 15, 1922.

² *Monthly Journal*, June 1922. Report quoted by J. Jeffrey, in *op. cit.*

The corruption, in fact, was amongst those who were well fed. The hungriest of all, the unemployed, largely through the work of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, and under Communist leadership, rallied everywhere to the picket line, and gave the most outstanding example of solidarity with the engineering workers.

The wobblings in high places, and particularly the role of the National Joint Industrial Council, had its effect. Ballots in the other engineering unions, except for the Boilermakers and Moulders, showed a majority for return to work. On June 2, the other unions in fact returned to work, and the A.E.U. stood once again alone. On June 10, 1922, the A.E.U. balloted, and by 75,478 to 35,453 decided to return. On June 13, after thirteen weeks, the lock-out ended. More than 13½ million working days had been lost. But this, despite all the efforts of the rank and file, was a retreat and a defeat. The employers made the most of it. There followed large-scale victimisation, wholesale changes of workshop practices, reduction of piecework prices, further cuts in wages. By the end of 1922, A.E.U. membership had fallen by 333,123, a fall of over 25 per cent since July 1920.

Once again the employers had been victorious. Once again they had divided one section of the workers from its allies, and divided this section within itself. Once again, their trump card had been the role of the right-wing leaders inside the Labour and trade union movement, with, this time, the key role of division being played by Arthur Henderson and the National Joint Council.

The Communist Party had put forward the slogan "Stop the Retreat". It had called for firmness of the engineers, solidarity of the 47 unions, solidarity of the whole Labour Movement with the engineers, an All-In Labour Congress. The Communist Party was still too weak and isolated to play a decisive role in the struggle. But through its leadership of the unemployed it gave the most striking example of solidarity with the battle of the engineers.

For the moment the employers had won. The miners had been defeated and, now that the engineers were routed, the retreat was becoming a stampede.

Employers' Offensive: June 1922-December 1923

Each retreat and each defeat strengthened the employers' offensive. Black Friday let loose a general attack in 1921 on the wages and living conditions of the shipyard workers, builders, seamen, cotton operatives, and, above all, the engineers. By the end of 1921, in a single year,

an average wage cut of 8s. per week had been suffered by six million workers.¹

In the same way the defeat of the engineers in June 1922 opened the way for a renewed onslaught in the second half of 1922 and in the following year—an onslaught on wages, hours, living and working conditions, one after the other, of builders, seamen, miners, farm-workers, railwaymen, dockers and many other sections.

As before, the capitalist tactic was to take on *one trade at a time*, to divide and rule; and, as before, they relied above all on the right-wing leaders of the trade union and general labour movement to bring them victory. In the face of the capitalist offensive, conciliation and arbitration meant in fact retreat and capitulation, and under such slogans the right wing “led” the workers to inevitable defeat. As before, the Communist Party, now helped by the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.) fought, during the whole period, to stop the retreat, to arouse the rank and file workers to stand firm and fight back and force their leaders to fight, to work for solidarity between trades and unity in struggle of all sections of the labour movement. By the end of that period, to some degree as a result of this effort, the movement of resistance began to harden, as exemplified by the struggle of the London dockers.

What the retreat meant in practice was shown by the fate of the miners. The 1921 agreement had guaranteed a minimum wage of 20 per cent above 1914, and, at the same time, a standard profit of 17 per cent to the owners. Only after the 17 per cent was paid could a further rise be permitted, and any deficit in the 17 per cent was totted up against the miners to be repaid before any increase of wages. With the steady rise of living costs—now 20 per cent above 1914—many miners had, in fact, *real* living standards that were below those of 1914. Some 250,000 adult miners were earning less than 45s. per week.

This was the position in December 1922, when the miners met in delegate conference. The Communist Party pointed out the position:²

“Mr. Frank Hodges said at your special Delegate Conference at the Memorial Hall on June 10 (1921) . . .

‘I venture to say it is the greatest wage-producing principle that has ever been introduced into this country!’

“Has your experience borne this out? . . . Mr. Hodges himself has admitted that many mining areas are ‘the famine areas’ of

¹ Allen Hutt, *Post War History of the British Working-Class*, pp. 62–64.

² *Communist*, December 23, 1922.

England. At one time twelve of your thirteen Districts were down on the minimum of 20 per cent above 1914 rates, when the Board of Trade showed that the cost of living was 80, 85 and 99 per cent above 1914."

The Party put four main proposals before the miners:¹

- "(i) Terminate the present agreement and demand an increase of wages of 80 per cent above the 1914 rates.
- "(ii) Demand the cancellation of the accumulated arrears of standard profits. . . .
- "(iii) Call upon the Labour Party to join with you in an agitation to enforce the operation of the Sankey Report and the Nationalisation of the Mines.
- "(iv) Call upon the General Council of the T.U.C. . . . against the attempt to lengthen your hours. . . ."

With the opening of 1923, both miners and engineers were suffering the rude consequences of retreat. The offensive rapidly spread to new fields—one after the other to the seamen and to the agricultural workers. The building employers demanded a 20 per cent wage-cut and a 47-hour week, and 500,000 building workers were threatened with a lock-out in April 1923.

"Why not a common stand of the Unions under attack?" wrote the *Workers' Weekly* at the end of March:

"Five hundred thousand builders are to be locked out (failing a last-minute new development) on April 1st. One million miners are being driven to desperation by starvation wages to see no course before them but a struggle. One million and more agricultural labourers in England and Wales are faced with the prospect of a general lock-out. Two hundred thousand seamen are to be brought down 20-25 per cent in wages or be locked-out. Thirty thousand jute workers are locked out in Dundee. Sixty thousand pottery workers are threatened immediately. . . . It may be said that some 3 million of the 13 million workers in these islands are under attack."²

The Communist Party, aided by the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U., again and again appealed for resistance, again and again pointed out

¹ Ibid.

² *Workers' Weekly*, March 31, 1923. Editorial, "The Way to Fight and Win".

that conciliation meant defeat; again and again showed that only unity between the workers of all sections and, in the first place, those under attack, could defeat the employers' onslaught. The Party in this period was making considerable progress in shedding some of its own sectarianism. The statements and appeals became less abstract and general: it was no longer felt necessary that every call for struggle should be accompanied with a general revolutionary appeal; the various declarations of the Party analysed the workers' demands in particular industries, put forward detailed plans of struggle (miners and engineers in 1922), began to help, in the face of repeated defeatism within the official leadership, with the organisation of the rank and file.

In April 1923 the Party issued a statement, *The Industrial Crisis—To All Party Members*,¹ calling on every member to play his part in whatever union he belonged to and putting as the main tasks to stop the retreat:

- “(i) To consolidate resistance and defeat all attempts at compromise, sabotage and betrayal.
- “(ii) To unify the fight in every possible way, officially and unofficially.
- “(iii) To extend the area of the struggle by pointing out the necessity of all sections taking up the issue now, when so many are already fighting, instead of waiting for the time after the others are defeated. . . .”

Was it rash or provocative to speak of “compromise, sabotage and betrayal”? In union after union the leadership had refused to struggle, and had rejected ballot after ballot of their members who were calling for struggle. In trade after trade the leaders had refused solidarity. In case after case, they had called for conciliation, arbitration, moderation, which in the context of the employers' offensive meant retreat and defeat. Right-wing trade union leaders like J. H. Thomas and Havelock Wilson were helped by the right wing in the Labour Party like Arthur Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald, never unwilling to arbitrate, conciliate, divert the workers from struggle. Whilst the employers were pursuing their savage offensive, the fire of the right-wing leaders was turned, above all, against the militants in the labour movement, with the Communist Party singled out (honoured) by attacks of a special venom. Nor was capitalism slow to appreciate the

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, April 7, 1923.

services of the right-wing Labour leaders (nor to find the way to reward them).

The attack on the seamen was met without struggle. The seamen's leader, Havelock Wilson, accepted the proposed cut of £1 per month, the third cut since the end of the war. The City Editor of *The Times*, wrote:

"that the present agreement has been made possible is probably due (or to a considerable extent) to the labours of Mr. Havelock Wilson, in whom the seamen have a representative who is held in deep respect by the owners."¹

The threatened builders' lock-out was never operated, as, despite large ballots for a firm stand, the leaders accepted sweeping concessions on wages and hours. The *Daily Herald* wrote:

"the men's leaders have shown their eagerness for a settlement, at risk of being repudiated by the men".²

A section of the agricultural workers made a courageous stand at the beginning of April. Ten thousand Norfolk farm labourers went on strike for a minimum wage of 30s. and a 50-hour week, and the strike spread to Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. But MacDonald, who had helped to break the resistance of the builders, aided the "settlement" of the agricultural workers' strike on conditions almost as they existed before the strike began—25s. per week with a 50-hour week in summer, 40 hours in winter, and 6d. for each additional two hours.

The capitalists had every reason to be grateful to the right-wing Labour leaders.

The Dockers' Strike of 1923

By the middle of 1923 there were signs of a stiffening in the resistance of the workers.

The Delegate Conference of the National Union of Railwaymen by a 2 to 1 vote rejected in April the employers' demand for a wage-cut, despite the appeals of Cramp and Thomas. The agricultural workers began to fight. In the same month, an indication of the new feelings, at the Annual Conference of N.U.D.A.W. there was a vote of 16,500 (to 30,000) for a motion that the T.U.C. should withdraw from the Amsterdam International and affiliate to R.I.L.U.³ But the

¹ *The Times*, March 29, 1923.

² *Daily Herald*, April 13, 1923.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, April 14, 1923.

most important sign of the new will to struggle was the fight of the dockers, particularly in London, expressed in the dock strike of July–August 1923.¹

In face of the demand for a shilling per day wage-cut, the strike began spontaneously at the beginning of July—starting at Cardiff, Bristol and Hull and spreading to London, Manchester, Birkenhead and parts of Eire. Sixty thousand dockers were involved at the peak of the strike—but in port after port, the dockers, attacked by the official trade union leaders, returned to work, except for London, where the struggle lasted well into August.

The position of the dockers was amongst the hardest in the British working class. Since June 1921 they had suffered cuts of roughly from 10s. to 16s. per day, quite apart from the fall of value of real wages. The casual nature of dock labour meant that, for most of them, wages averaged out at 5s. per day.²

The dockers' strike showed the new militancy and capacity to resist of the rank and file (amongst whom, especially in London, were many Communists). Strike committees were elected at mass meetings and strike bulletins published. Envoys were sent to other unions and workshops, especially in transport—railway depots, bus and tram garages, etc.—strike funds were collected.

From the beginning, Bevin and the official T.G.W.U. leaders opposed the strike, accusing the unofficial leaders and the Communists of wanting to destroy the union. (Being stabbed in the back was an early gambit of Ernest Bevin.) The unofficial leaders made quite clear that this was not the case:

“On this point we are emphatic. We are not out to smash the union. We want it strengthened. We want it to fight the battle of the workers. For that reason we ask the leaders to use the union machinery on *our* side in this fight.”³

The campaign in London was very militant. Great open-air meetings were held at the docks and in the dockside areas. Dockers' demonstrations forced the Boards of Guardians to grant unemployment relief whilst in Labour areas like West Ham and Poplar, it was given without pressure. Smithfield porters, Hull railwaymen and

¹ See *Workers' Weekly*, July and August 1923, and also issues of *The Docker*, bulletin of the Dockers' Unofficial Strike Committee.

² *The Docker*, No. 1, July 10, 1923.

³ Statement of the Unofficial Strike Committee in *The Docker*, No. 1, July 10, 1923.

carmen at Hayes Wharf all showed their solidarity by refusing to handle black goods. There were almost daily mass gatherings on Tower Hill.

The unofficial leaders in London had the support of the overwhelming majority of the dockers. On July 27 a meeting of several thousand dockers howled down the official leaders, Bevin and Gosling, and then walked out of the meeting followed by the rest of the audience. Gosling himself described it:

"The hall was packed with a mixed audience of 2,000 [the militant press said 5,000], but they had come, as we very soon found, not to listen to what we had to say, but to shout us down. We were two against two thousand . . . we tried to speak but it was impossible. 'Traitors—blacklegs—false leaders—clear out . . .' were shot at us from everywhere at once, and when the audience was tired of that, or rather, to put it in official language, had 'shown that it had no confidence' in us, it withdrew in a body and left us as we were."¹

The Communist Party (with the British Bureau of R.I.L.U.) was extremely active, not only through its own members amongst the dockers, who were amongst the leaders of the unofficial committee, but in the independent organisation of solidarity meetings, especially in East London. Communist speakers raised the issue of solidarity all over the country. Collections were made for the dockers. The *Workers' Weekly* for the period issued a special daily edition. On July 28, 1923, the Party issued a "Call to the Workers"² appealing for solidarity, warning against the class conciliation of the leaders and drawing the lessons:

"In this strike, the dockers are not only fighting for themselves, they are fighting for the whole working class. They must therefore receive the practical support of the rest of the workers. Do not the experiences of the last two years prove to us all, that to break the capitalists we must be united in our resistance and in our attack?

"The isolation of the miners and the engineers placed these sections of the workers' army at the mercy of the capitalists. Is this to be repeated in the dockers' strike?

"Now is the time to act, while the dockers are out. In particular, it is the duty of all members of these Unions who are engaged in the transport industry to come out on strike at once with the dockers

¹ Harry Gosling, *Up and Down Stream*, p. 193, Methuen, 1927.

² *Workers' Weekly*, July 28, 1923.

... the dockers have led the way in the fight against the capitalists. They must not be left alone. . . .”

The London strikers courageously maintained the strike alone. Disgusted by the role of the official T.G.W.U. leaders, some dockers, including members of the unofficial Strike Committee, began in desperation to call for the formation of a new separate union.

The right-wing Labour leaders never lost a chance of accusing the Communists of splitting the labour movement and dividing the unions. *In fact, the Communist Party, from the first and publicly, opposed any split in the T.G.W.U., and resisted any attempt at a break-away.* In the *Workers' Weekly* of August 11, the Party made its position clear:

“The mistake that is being made by the Strike Committee and some of the active men inside the various sections of dockside Labour, is in trying to form new unions. *The job at the moment is to win this strike.* . . . That can only be done by keeping unity in the ranks, and the men should refuse to be dragged into any campaign that has leaving their present union and joining or forming other unions for its object.

“At all meetings addressed by Communist Party members, special prominence is given in all speeches to the danger of this ‘Leave the Union’ campaign.”¹

On August 18, the Communist Party issued a “Warning to Dockers” explaining that what the situation demanded was not a breakaway union but the extension of the strike from London to the other ports.

Eventually, on August 19, 1923, after six weeks of courageous struggle, the London dockers, at a series of mass meetings, accepted the recommendation of the Strike Committee to resume work on August 21.

They had not won, but it could not be called a defeat. For the first time in this period of retreat the rank and file had rejected the advice of their leaders, had stood up and fought back. The dockers’ struggle showed an alternative path to retreat. It was the beginning of a certain return to resistance of the working class. And in this struggle the Communist Party and the London Committee of the R.I.L.U. had played an important part. The beneficial results of the Party re-organisation were becoming apparent.

Once again, the capitalists were not unaware of what a full victory

¹ Ibid., August 11, 1923. See also editorial, “Back to the Union” in the same issue.

of the dockers would have meant, nor to whom they should be grateful that this did not come about. As the *Daily Telegraph* put it:

"The Labour leaders concerned emerge from it [the strike] with credit to themselves . . . it would have been a disaster with incalculable consequences reacting on the whole industrial outlook if such a strike had proved successful."¹

Very significant was the role of Ernest Bevin. As one of his semi-official biographers explained, he:

"wanted to establish before the employers and the nation the fact that a new type of trade union leader had risen. He wanted to prove that he was justified in asking for an increase when times improved . . . he also wanted to demonstrate that he was prepared to consider a reduction when times were bad. And so he advised the Executive to enter into negotiations with the employers."²

THE BRITISH BUREAU OF R.I.L.U.

It was the right-wing domination of the trade union leadership that in the 1921-1922 period led to so disastrous a retreat before the employers' offensive.

The reformist policy within the trade unions was class conciliation, arbitration, acceptance of the state as a neutral body above classes that could play an "impartial" role in arbitration, avoidance of conflict, retreat before attack, rejection of class solidarity within nations and on an international scale. Such a policy, expressed so clearly in the post-war leadership of the British trade union movement, was embodied, on a world scale, in the leadership of the International Federation of Trade Unions (I.F.T.U.), usually known as the Amsterdam International, and operating under the leadership of the Second International.

One of the main problems that faced Communists and the Left in this period, not only in Britain but in many countries, was to find the political and organisational form for rallying the militants within the trade unions for a generally combative policy, for resistance to the employers, and to win the unions away from the reformist leaders who dominated them.

On the initiative of the Communist International a Provisional

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, August 16, 1923.

² Trevor Evans, *Bevin*, pp. 91-93, Allen and Unwin, 1946.

International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions (P.I.C.T.I.U.), was formed in Moscow in mid-1920¹ with the aim, on an international scale, of establishing an alternative, militant, revolutionary, international centre to the Amsterdam International, riddled with reformism, and dominated by the trade union leaders of a few west European countries, and of winning the trade union movement from the reformist class-collaboration to a militant and revolutionary policy. A number of prominent British trade unionists, including A. A. Purcell and Robert Williams (of the Transport Workers' Federation), associated themselves with this initiative.

In January 1921, this Provisional International Council, with the signatures of M. Tomskey (Soviet Union), A. Rosmer (France), and J. T. Murphy (Great Britain), published a "Manifesto to the Organised Workers of Britain", calling on British trade unions and trade unionists to withdraw from the Amsterdam International, to support the Provisional International Council and to elect their delegates to a World Trade Union Congress, which, under the auspices of the Council, would be held in Moscow in May 1921. The Congress was, in fact, postponed and finally held in June–July 1921, and there the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.) was formally established. Amongst the British delegates attending were Tom Mann, Harry Pollitt, R. Page Arnot, Olive Budden, J. T. Murphy, Nat Watkins, David Proudfoot, James Stewart, Will Hewlett and Ellen Wilkinson.²

In Britain, on the initiative of the Communist Party and with the support of a number of militant non-Communist trade unionists, a British Bureau of the Provisional International Council was established in January 1921,³ with Ted Lismer, in Manchester, as Secretary, and with Harry Pollitt as Secretary of the London Committee. A number of local committees were also set up in Scotland, South Wales, Lancashire, Yorkshire, North-East England and the Midlands.⁴

On the formation of R.I.L.U., the British Bureau of the Provisional International Council became the British Bureau of R.I.L.U., with Tom Mann as Chairman, Nat Watkins as Secretary, and Harry Pollitt as Secretary of the London Bureau.⁵ Later, Pollitt took over the Secretaryship of the British Bureau.

¹ *Communist*, October 14, 1920—"Industrial Jottings".

² Unpublished note by Harry Pollitt on *Origin of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U.*

³ *Communist*, February 12, 1921.

⁴ *Ibid.*, February 19, 1921.

⁵ See leaflet of *British Bureau of R.I.L.U.*, October 1921.

When it was first formed, the British Bureau of the Provisional International Council was mainly concerned with winning trade unionists away from reformism and reformist leadership and towards an understanding of revolutionary principles. The propaganda was mainly of an abstract, generalised character and definitely weakened by sectarianism. From the outset, however, it made it quite clear that it did *not* stand for the splitting of the trade unions, however reactionary the leadership might be, but for a fight against reformism and class conciliation *inside* the official trade union movement.¹

The same general approach was inherited by the British Bureau of R.I.L.U., but rapidly, and particularly under the influence of Harry Pollitt, it became less concerned with general propaganda for revolutionary ideas, which was the job of the Communist Party, and began to fight for a *militant line of struggle within* the British trade unions, to fight to stop the retreat, for effective action on issues of wages, hours and factory conditions, to campaign for trade union amalgamation, for solidarity between union and union, and to explain the general aim of industrial unions.

Thus, in 1921, the British Bureau, and especially the London Bureau of R.I.L.U., became very active. It had close association with most of the militant trade unionists in Britain, like George Sanders, Ben Smith, Jack Tanner, A. J. Cook and many others.² It held many hundreds of meetings in the industrial centres, and began to emerge as a rallying ground for militant resistance to the capitalist offensive.

As the official trade union leadership went from retreat to retreat, and especially after the disaster of Black Friday, more and more militants began to gather round the British Bureau of R.I.L.U.³ The Bureau began to campaign in meetings, demonstrations, and leaflets, in its journal, *The Worker* (which it had taken over from the Glasgow Shop Stewards' Movement), and from the beginning of 1922 in its monthly magazine, *All Power*, around slogans of "Keep in the Union", "Away with Sectionalism", "Let the General Council of the T.U.C. rally the entire movement in support of any section attacked", "Support the Unemployed so that they will prevent blacklegging", "Strengthen the Trades Councils so that effective local resistance can be organised".

An important statement summarising the lines of the campaign was

¹ Statement of British Bureau of P.I.C.T.I.U. in *Communist*, February 19, 1921.

² Unpublished note of Harry Pollitt.

³ *Communist*, November 18, 1922—"Reorganise the Trade Union Movement".

issued by Harry Pollitt for the London Committee of R.I.L.U. in 1921.¹ The statement called for a turn away from generalised revolutionary propaganda towards practical work to strengthen the trade union struggle against capitalism:

“It is the duty of every active worker of R.I.L.U. to participate in every action and question concerning the Trade Unions. It is not enough to call for the Revolution, we must relate our principles and experiences to the everyday struggles of the trade unionists. . . .”

This statement put forward the long-term aim of “one union for one industry”. It called for the greatest effort of all trade unions to support the struggle of the unemployed, to encourage their unemployed members to be active in the unemployed movement, to fight for the slogan “Work or Maintenance at Trade Union rates”. It urged all trade unions and trade unionists to fight against the employers’ attempts to cut wages and lengthen working hours, stop the retreat before the employers’ offensive:

“The Trade Unions are like an army in battle, the army is retreating, they are being pushed farther and farther back. Suddenly a command rings out: ‘The retreat cannot be allowed to continue: the army must put their backs to the wall and stand their ground, otherwise hopeless and lasting defeat must follow.’ A call like that stiffens the backs of the soldiers, and many a position has been retrieved! *The Unions must put their backs to the wall, it is either united resistance or defeat and the decisive moment is now.*”²

The statement called on trade unionists to build up and strengthen the Trades Councils, and to work for the affiliation of the Unemployed Committees and Workshop or Factory Committees to these Councils. Reformism and the reformist leadership, it explained, must be combated, and an effort made to replace the right-wing leaders by militant trade unionists ready to lead the fight. But the main way to fight reformism is not through personal abuse but by leadership of the struggle:

“The Unions will learn through struggle . . . avoid personalities, the principles we have to propagate are too big for any time to be

¹ *Statement on Organisation and Policy*, issued by H. Pollitt for London Committee of R.I.L.U.—4 pp. folder.

² *Ibid.*

wasted on personal attack. We can establish our influence on knowledge and facts, and the workers with their new outlook will then be able to discriminate between efficient and inefficient leadership.”¹

The British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. became, step by step, a rallying ground in the main British industrial centres against the retreat of the official leadership:

“The Communist Party and the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. were taking a leading part in organising the resistance of the workers and helping to develop common forms of action which would render the resistance more effective. The campaign was carried out under the battlecry of ‘Stop The Retreat!’.

“For the official Trade Union leaders were in a state of hopeless retreat, completely demoralised and doing their damndest to spread the rot among the rank and file, but without success.”²

On October 15, 1921, the British Bureau of R.I.L.U. organised a National Conference in the Memorial Hall, London, that was attended by 650 delegates, representing amongst others over 300 trade union branches, 10 District Committees of trade unions, and 14 Trades Councils. The chair was taken by Fred Thompson of the Dockers, and the main report given by Harry Pollitt.³ This was followed in December by a National Recruiting Week (December 1-8, 1921), with meetings in industrial centres all over the country.

With 1922, and particularly the engineers’ lock-out, more and more trade unions and trade unionists began to see the need to “Stop the Retreat” and rally round the British Bureau of R.I.L.U. There was a strong campaign inside the South Wales Miners’ Federation for affiliation to R.I.L.U. (supported amongst others by S. O. Davies, A. J. Cook, Jack Jones of Abertillery and Jack Jones of Pontypool), but this was rejected at the National Conference of the Miners’ Federation in July 1922 by 800 votes to 118.

The campaigning issues of the British Bureau in 1922 were “Back to the Unions” (to combat the rapid fall in membership, a natural but wrong reaction to the right-wing policy of retreat), a six-hour day for the miners, a minimum wage of £4 per week for adult workers, work or full maintenance at trade union rates for the unemployed, more power for the Trades Councils, more power to the

¹ Ibid.

² Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, p. 146.

³ *Communist*, October 22, 1921.

General Council of the T.U.C. to co-ordinate the struggle against the employers, affiliation of the T.U.C. to R.I.L.U.

A large number of successful conferences were held in the principal industrial areas.¹ At the London Conference (September 23, 1922), 300 delegates represented 176 Trades Councils and trade union branches, and resolutions were adopted on the fight to defend wages, to resist the lengthening of working hours, and on workshop rights and conditions. Similar conferences were held at Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff. In all these conferences together there was an attendance of 905 delegates, with delegates from trade union branches representing 166,800 workers, and from Trades Councils, district committees, etc., with a membership of 851,840. Thus the representatives of over one million workers were involved in these rallies around the militant slogans of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U.

One of the main campaigning issues of the British Bureau was the need to build and strengthen the Trades Councils, and this campaign was one of the main contributory factors to the calling, on the initiative of the Birmingham Trades Council, of the first National Conference of Trades Councils on October 14, 1922. Towards the end of the year, also under the initiative of the British Bureau, a number of rank and file trade union organisations began to be developed in particular industries, of which the most important was the Miners' Minority Movement that started to spread from South Wales to the other coalfields, and Minority Movements in engineering and shipbuilding.

The British Bureau campaign was continued in 1923. A large Conference was held on April 14, 1923, by the London Committee, with over 200 delegates.² In August there were a number of organisational changes, and W. Gallacher and J. R. Campbell took over as Joint Secretaries from Harry Pollitt, Tom Mann remaining the Chairman of the British Bureau.

The contrast between the right-wing policy of retreat and class-conciliation and the militant policy of class struggle and counter-offensive against the employers was reflected in two national trade union conferences at the end of 1923.

The Plymouth (55th) National Conference of the T.U.C. was a full product of defeat. T.U.C. membership showed a drop of 760,000 on the previous year. It was, as Pollitt wrote, "the poorest Congress even the oldest delegates can remember",³ but marked by the

¹ *Ibid.*, September 23, September 30, October 21, and November 18, 1922.

² *Workers' Weekly*, April 21, 1923.

³ *Ibid.*, September 15, 1923.

courageous stand of a small group of militants which included nine members of the Communist Party, under the leadership of Pollitt, himself a delegate from the Boilermakers' Union.

In utter contrast was the Second National Congress of Trades Councils on November 17, 1923, with 70 Trades Council delegates representing 750,000 workers, under the Chairmanship of Harry Pollitt, who made the main opening address.¹

The Conference adopted by 29 to 20 a resolution of great significance on the role of the Trades Councils. Explaining that Trades Councils which were merely "debating societies" were of little value, the resolution stated that:

"... this Conference resolves that it is most urgently necessary for all Trades Councils to become active and energetic agitational bodies, taking up all the questions and problems affecting the workers—such as unemployment, housing, wage cuts, rents, and so on. The Trades Councils should become the leading propagandist bodies in the country. They should become the true guardians of all working class resolutions."

Another resolution stressed the importance of the Trades Councils becoming the all-in, united, co-ordinating bodies of the working-class movement in the different localities:

"This Conference, believing that the Trades Councils are the natural concentration centres of the working class movement in the locality and believing, further, that the present conditions demand that a united working class front is necessary in the localities to oppose the maximum amount of resistance to the capitalist offensive, calls upon all Trades Councils to widen their Constitution so as to admit the affiliation of all bona-fide political, industrial, co-operative and social working class organisations, in this way simplifying and reorganising the local movement."

A Glasgow resolution, unanimously adopted, called for the preparation of a National Programme of Action with every local Trades Council submitting suggestions. The Conference demanded the direct representation of the Trades Councils at the T.U.C., and the right to appoint two delegates to the General Council. A Provisional Com-

¹ Ibid., November 23, 1923. Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, pp. 169-179.

mittee was reappointed for the following year, and Harry Pollitt was unanimously voted Chairman.

The work of the Communist Party, with its new leadership and with its organisation radically improved, of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U., along with the militants in the Labour and trade union movement was beginning to have its effect, stiffening the movement of resistance developing from below in the rank and file of the unions, in the Trades Councils of the different localities, developing new forces that could stop the retreat, and replace it by a counter offensive against the employers.

The British Bureau of R.I.L.U., established and built up under the leadership of the Communist Party, served as a rallying centre of militant trade unionism in this period when the official right-wing trade union leaders were preaching retreat before the capitalist offensive. It contributed greatly to counteracting the demoralisation that developed in the ranks of the working class, to holding the crumbling strength of the trade union movement, to developing from below working-class unity in different trades, different unions, in the Trades Councils, to defend wages and hours and the living conditions of the working class.

Of course there were weaknesses and mistakes in the character of the work of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U.

It was correct for the Communists and militant socialists to put forward their views on the need for and character of social revolution, to combat reformism, to campaign for socialism. It was correct and necessary that such education should be carried out inside the trade unions as in all other sections of the working-class movement. There is nothing secret about the aim of revolutionaries to win trade unionists for an understanding of scientific socialism, just in the same way as those with reformist ideas, or those with religious views, constantly put these views before the trade union members.

But in the period of the British Bureau of the Provisional International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions (P.I.C.T.I.U.) and in the first period of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U. there was a tendency to carry out abstract and generalised revolutionary propaganda. There was a tendency, too, to duplicate what was, in fact, the function of the Communist Party—the fight for a general Marxist revolutionary understanding—and to make advanced political demands on their supporters, when what was needed was to rally all militants, irrespective of political outlook, for a firm stand against the employers.

This mistake began to be overcome in the course of 1921 and, particularly under the leadership of Harry Pollitt, the British Bureau of R.I.L.U. began to concentrate on the fight to stop the retreat, for solidarity, for defence of wages and hours, for the building up of the unions, for the unity of all trades, for the building of broad comprehensive Trades Councils. Step by step the sectarian mistakes began to be overcome.

The right-wing leaders, who led the retreat, and who were directly responsible for the wholesale flight from the trade union movement, attacked the Communists and the British Bureau of R.I.L.U. as splitters and disrupters of the trade union movement. *The truth was the reverse.*

The British Bureau of R.I.L.U. took up from the beginning a firm stand against the formation of any separate "red" or revolutionary unions. Its leaders stood for single all-inclusive trade unions, they campaigned for the workers to "return to the unions", they opposed the conception of breakaway unions (Dockers), they opposed the split in the Fife Miners' Union (January 1923), however much they sympathised with the feelings of the militant Fife miners and their disgust with the local right wing, they fought to strengthen factory committees, to build and broaden the Trades Councils, for solidarity between the unions, for greater power for the General Council of the T.U.C. to lead the fight against capitalism. The splitting, disruption, demoralisation came from the right-wing leaders.

The British Bureau of R.I.L.U. held very numerous meetings in the main industrial centres, brought together, in these years, the representatives of hundreds of thousands of workers, acted as a force of co-ordination, gave new strength and morale to the rank and file.

The work of the British Bureau contributed greatly to the development of unity between the unemployed and employed workers, to the development of rank and file organisation (dockers, miners, engineers), and played under the leadership of the Communist Party an important role in turning the movement, in the course of 1923, from one of abject retreat to one holding the employers' offensive, and the beginnings of a counter-offensive against capitalism.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE FIGHT OF THE UNEMPLOYED

"You will return," pledged the capitalists to the soldiers in the forces, "to a land fit for heroes." But hardly had those who were fortunate

enough to return made their way back to Britain and found themselves a job, than capitalism, passing from short boom into deep slump, had no further need of them. Useless, rejected goods on an unfavourable market, tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions of men and women were condemned to semi-starvation without work.

In the autumn of 1920 there were a quarter of a million of unemployed. By the end of the year, the figure had risen to 700,000 (in fact, in December, 5·8 per cent of all insured persons). By February 1921, the million mark was passed; by March it was 1·3 million; by June 1921, over two million (17·8 per cent of the insured). The number fell a little at the end of 1921 to some 1½ million in 1922. It was to be many years before the unemployed total was to fall below the one million mark. Whole areas of Britain's best industrial skills and talents were rendered derelict. The martyrdom of areas like South Wales, the Tyneside, and large parts of Scotland began. Whole generations of youth were to grow up not knowing what it was to work for a living. Many who had skills and talents lost them; some never found the opportunity to develop them. Such was the much-claimed capitalist freedom and care for the development of human personality.

For British capitalism this great "reserve army of labour" would in theory have become a reserve of strength. By its use, or abuse, the capitalists could hope to blackmail industrial workers into the acceptance of lower wages and worse conditions, to break up their unions, to find ready recruits for their police force and army, strike-breakers for use against other workers at home and abroad. This was the great question—would these unemployed masses become a reserve of capitalism, or would they—the greatest sufferers from capitalism in Britain—become militant in the fight against capitalism? Which side would they take in the battle of capital versus labour? The fact that, overwhelmingly, the unemployed gave a splendid example of struggle, and that over the next few years (1920–1923) they became the most active fighters against capitalism, was to no small degree due to the efforts of the Communist Party.

The first definite forms of unemployed organisation in Britain developed in the late autumn of 1920, mainly as local Unemployed Ex-Servicemen's Committees:

"In the main they had no clear working class policy and they appeared to be formed purely for charity-mongering purposes.

Demonstrations were organised to march the streets for the sole purpose of begging charity as a mode of relieving distress.”¹

An organisation, the “National Union of Ex-Servicemen” in which the Communist Party came to have an influence, carried out more militant activity. Moreover, many of the first victims of the plague of unemployment were the war-time engineering shop stewards, whose industries were amongst the first to suffer and whose employers were, in any case, only too anxious to dispense with their services. Some of these had been leading members of the National Shop Stewards’ and Workers’ Committee Movement, and some foundation members of the Communist Party. They began to see the need of a quite new and quite different type of unemployed association where organisation and struggle would replace begging for charity. In different areas all over Britain active, loosely organised Unemployed Committees began to arise. One of the most militant was the Coventry Committee elected in early October 1920, at a mass meeting of 1,200, and it was, from the beginning, under Communist leadership.² But the most important development took place in London.

Early in October 1920, a number of London Labour mayors, on the initiative of George Lansbury, demanded an interview with the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, to discuss the growth of unemployment in the boroughs. Ten thousand unemployed marched from all over London to the Thames Embankment and thence to Whitehall to support the mayors, and were met with a heavy police attack. This demonstration spurred on the movement in London.

The Communist Party, again particularly in London, and also in Scotland, the Midlands, and Wales, strongly supported the establishment of militant organisations of the unemployed. One of the first circulars sent out by the Communist Party after its foundation³ was devoted to the fight on unemployment. This would be, it stressed, one of the main issues facing the working class in the coming months. Party members on borough or town councils should make this their first priority. Whilst the Party should do its best to explain the fundamental relations between capitalism and unemployment, it should

¹ Wal Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles, 1919-1936*, p. 13. This book is the main source for the history of post-war unemployed struggles, and I have drawn on it largely in this section. See also Wal Hannington, *Never on our Knees* (1967).

² *Communist*, October 7 and 28, 1920.

³ Circular of Communist Party to Branch Secretaries of October 21, 1920, on “The Unemployment Agitation”, signed by MacManus and Inkpin.

also do all possible to further the fight now. Party premises should be put at the disposal of the committees of the unemployed:

“Our Branches are called upon to play their part in the forthcoming struggle, and must, where possible, take the lead.”¹

The movement spread in London with tremendous speed. On the initiative of a young Communist engineer, Wal Hannington, the St. Pancras Unemployed Committee convened an All London Conference of unemployed and Unemployed Committees. The Conference was held at the end of October 1920, with delegates from a dozen London Committees, and the London District Council of the Unemployed (L.D.C.U.) was founded with Hannington as organiser, P. Haye as Secretary, and Jack Holt as Chairman—all three engineers, all three former members of the Shop Stewards’ movement, and all three members of the Communist Party.

The movement continued to spread. Within a few weeks representatives from over 30 London Committees were regularly attending the meetings of the Council, which adopted the slogan put forward by the Communist Party—“Work or Full Maintenance”.

Under the Poor Law Relief Regulation Order of 1911 it was illegal for the Board of Guardians, the Poor Law local authorities, to provide outdoor relief unless the applicant was put to task work, received half his relief in kind, and met other exacting conditions. The L.D.C.U. refused to accept such legal restrictions, and, under the slogan of “Go To The Guardians”, organised a series of militant (and spectacular) demonstrations in different areas all over London. Some Boards of Guardians with Labour majorities were sympathetic; others were decidedly hostile. But the demonstrations were neither mild nor inclined to brook refusal. There was a world of difference between the militant leadership of the unemployed, whose leaders stood in the foreground urging them into struggle, and the reformist leadership of the trade union movement, with the leaders in the background urging them to retreat.

Unemployed demonstrations “found their way” into Board Rooms, and refused to budge without relief. Pitched battles with the police were often needed to remove them, and, in many cases, the Guardians were compelled to grant, quite illegally, the relief demanded.

Simultaneously, the demand was raised for suitable meeting places for the unemployed committees and their members. Some borough

¹ Ibid.

councils agreed to find premises. Others refused. Upon which the unemployed would take the matter into their own hands, and find their own premises in empty houses, public bars, baths or public libraries. The Islington Library in Essex Road was held for several weeks until it was "recaptured" by the police. There were similar struggles ("invasions") in Edmonton, Tottenham, Walthamstow, Hackney, Southwark, Camberwell, Peckham, St. Pancras, etc.¹ Communists were amongst the most active in these struggles.

"In all these movements the active spirits have been Communists, themselves unemployed. They know how impossible it is to solve unemployment while the capitalist system remains, but they realise also the necessity for organised action in order to drive the lesson home, and to ensure that something, at any rate, is done to alleviate immediate distress. Communist branches everywhere should neglect no opportunity of giving support and guidance to the unemployed movement. In most localities they are already doing so."²

The mass campaign and the mass pressure had their effect. In November 1920, an Act was passed raising the benefit scale to 15s. for male adults and 12s. for female adults, but still with no special provision for wife and children of unemployed workers. Even with this advance, the cost of living index stood at 276 compared with 1913 at 100, and the benefit scale at just over 200.

The fact that the unemployed movement was, in the main, under Communist and militant leadership, did not mean that there was an attempt to monopolise it. In fact, constant efforts were made by the L.D.C.U. and its sections, and later by the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement (N.U.W.C.M.), to get the Labour Party and the T.U.C. to participate in and to support their activity. The L.D.C.U. appealed first to the National Council of Action to take up the struggle for work or for full maintenance, and to press for the re-establishment of trade with Soviet Russia as one means of providing work for the unemployed. But they met with scant response. Agreement was finally reached that the Special Conference of the Labour Party (held at the end of December 1920) on the Irish position, should devote a session to the problem of unemployment. The Conference decided that a joint meeting of the executives of Labour Party, Parliamentary Committee and T.U.C. should set up a sub-committee to draw up the demands of the unemployed.

¹ *Communist*, December 9, 1920.

² *Ibid.*

The L.D.C.U. organised a demonstration of 10,000 unemployed to the meeting of the Joint Committee at Eccleston Square, and created a “congenial atmosphere” for a decision to be taken to convene a National Labour Conference of working-class delegates in London at Kingsway Hall on January 27, 1921. When the conference met, on a very militant background and, so far as the mass of delegates were concerned, ready for strong action, including strike action, the right-wing leaders of the Labour and trade union movement, J. H. Thomas, Arthur Henderson, J. R. Clynes, and their kind, did their utmost to steer it away from militant action. A request of the L.D.C.U. to receive a deputation was rejected. But, under heavy pressure, it was agreed that the conference should reassemble on February 23, having tested the feelings of the organisations represented on the issue of direct action against the Government.

When the conference reassembled, with many delegates ready to support a 24-hour strike, the platform leadership refused discussion of anything but the official resolution of general abstract criticism of the Government, and with no proposals for further action. The meeting ended stormily, but with no positive decisions. Within half an hour some 10,000 London unemployed, who had been waiting in Hyde Park, marched to the conference hall to pledge themselves to continue the fight against unemployment. The right-wing leadership not only refused to lead the fight for the demands of the unemployed, but began, more and more, to turn their faces against the Communist Party and other militants who *were* leading the struggle.

Formation of the N.U.W.C.M.

Meanwhile, as 1921 rolled on, unemployment continued to rise. Unemployed struggles, most advanced in London, were developing all over the country, and with them a network of unemployed committees. The L.D.C.U. decided to call a National Conference with the aim of creating a national unemployed organisation. With unemployment around two millions, the first National Conference of Unemployed was held at the International Socialist Club, London, on April 15, 1921, with representatives from some 70–80 Committees.¹ Many, unable to find the finance to participate personally, wrote in their support. Here the National Unemployed Workers’ Committee

¹ See article by P. Haye, First Secretary N.U.W.C.M., “Appeal to all Unemployed,” in *Communist*, September 3, 1921.

Movement (N.U.W.C.M.) was established with a National Administrative Council (N.A.C.) from five geographical areas, and with Haye as Secretary, Jack Holt as Chairman, and Wal Hannington as Organiser. On April 23, the Third Congress of the Communist Party, meeting at St. Pancras, voted its support for the unemployed movement.

At the end of March 1921, the Government had raised the unemployed benefit from 15s. to 20s. for men, and from 12s. to 16s. for women. But, at the end of June, it reduced it again to what it had been before. There followed a period of tremendous unemployed struggle under the leadership of the N.U.W.C.M. and the Communist Party, with local support from many Labour Party and I.L.P. militants and progressive trade unionists, but with continuous resistance (ranging from disapproval to open attack) from the right-wing Labour leadership.

In July 1921 the Wandsworth Workhouse was virtually taken over and occupied by unemployed and their families, and then run by an elected committee with red flag flying from the rooftop. Solidarity demonstrations daily marched to support them, until the Board of Guardians was compelled to yield. On August 12, many thousands of Sheffield unemployed marched to the Town Hall. In September, on the initiative of the Abertillery Branch of the Communist Party,¹ some 5,000 Western Valley unemployed made a 15-mile march to the Tredegar Workhouse. There were repeated demonstrations all over Lancashire. In October, there were big struggles in Cardiff. In Glasgow, John MacLean and Harry McShane were leading the unemployed into action.

September-October 1921 was the period of the Poplar struggles under left Labour leadership with the support of the Communist Party. In Poplar the Labour (including some Communists) majority on the borough council withheld the payment due to the county council and other authorities as a protest against the saddling of local bodies with the whole burden of relief, and the extreme inequality of the distribution of the burden so that the poorest localities had the most to pay.

Legal action was taken against the Poplar Council, but they stood firm. On September 1 the majority of the Councillors, led by George Lansbury, were imprisoned for contempt of court. "Guilty and proud of it", was their slogan. The Poplar struggle gave no pleasure to the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party and came strongly under

¹ *Communist*, September 24, 1921.

attack from Ramsay MacDonald and Herbert Morrison. The struggle was a good example of left unity. Two of the Poplar Councillors, Edgar and Minnie Lansbury, were then members of the Communist Party, while the strongest support from other Labour Councillors came from Bethnal Green with its Communist Mayor, J. J. Vaughan.¹

The Poplar struggle roused tremendous feeling in the working-class movement. After six weeks the Government rushed through legislation that helped, a little, to even up the Poor Law expenditure between richer and poorer boroughs. The Councillors were released amidst popular rejoicing:

“They were imprisoned for refusing to obey an order of the High Court to levy certain rates. They were released without giving any undertaking, open or secret, complete or partial, to levy them. . . . The Poplar affair is a lesson in Communist action. It has broken down the intolerable bourgeois-instilled veneration for the office and dignity of mayor, councillor, &c., it afforded the local unemployed a powerful battle-cry; it exposed the empty wordiness of the normal run of Labour mayors and councils. . . .”²

Edgar Lansbury replied in the *Communist*³ to Herbert Morrison’s onslaught in the London *Labour Chronicle* against the struggle of the Labour Councillors:

“The (London) Labour Party Executive Committee and the London Mayors pulled all the wires to . . . isolate Poplar. They even sent a resolution to every Labour Council asking them not to follow Poplar.”

The Poplar “revolt”, Morrison explained, would be a precedent for Tory councils. It would be dangerous for Labour “to appear to create chaos”. In fact, wrote Edgar Lansbury, Poplar had gained £300,000 by the stand taken.

Another important unemployed struggle was carried out in Shoreditch under the leadership of a Communist, A. B. Elsbury, in the form of a “no-rent strike” against unemployment:

“A scheme was devised by the Committee whereby Shoreditch was to be divided into 16 parts, each under one of the (unemployed) committees’ marshals. Each street to have its picket to report evictions to the marshal, for combined assistance. A sticker, red on

¹ Ibid., September 17, 1921.

² Ibid., “Poplar”, October 22, 1921.

³ Ibid., November 12, 1921.

yellow, was put in hand, and soon the streets were ablaze with the words 'No Work, No Rent'. Shop windows, walls, doors, all blazed forth the slogan. A policeman was seen walking down Pitfield Street, the yellow sticker showing up well against the blue of his back."¹

The Second Conference of the N.U.W.C.M. was held in Gorton Town Hall, Manchester, at the end of November 1921,² with 140 delegates from 90 Committees. To find the money to send a delegate to a conference was no easy matter for unemployed workers living on the verge of starvation, and another 50 committees were unrepresented. By now a fortnightly paper, *Out of Work*, was in production with a sale reaching, at its peak, 40-50,000. A regular organisational structure was adopted at the Conference—Branches, District Councils, a National Administrative Council (N.A.C.). A programme was elaborated. Of particular importance was the decision for the closest possible association of the N.U.W.C.M. with the trade union movement, for application for affiliation locally to the Trades Councils, for representation at the annual T.U.C.

In utter contrast to the trade union retreat, the last months of 1921 and the early months of 1922 were, for the unemployed movement, under militant leadership, a period of combat and high morale. There were audacious "factory raids" on factories where work was being undertaken below trade union rates, big demonstrations and struggles against evictions of the unemployed in Sheffield and Glasgow. As we have seen, in March-June 1922, the unemployed, under N.U.W.C.M. leadership, played a particularly praiseworthy role in the engineers' lock-out, swelling the picket line, raiding factories where blacklegs were working, compelling Boards of Guardians in the engineering centres to pay outdoor relief to the locked-out engineers on the same scale as the unemployed.

From June 19-25, a special National Agitational Week was organised to fight against indirect cuts in unemployment benefit. At the beginning of August 1922, the Birmingham branch of the N.U.W.C.M. organised a march of unemployed to London to interview the Ministers of Labour and Health, which, after its eight-day trek, was welcomed by big demonstrations. In November, a vast demonstration of 25,000 London unemployed marched to the Cenotaph to place a wreath

¹ A. B. Elsbury, "Shoreditch Experiences" in *Communist*, October 8, 1921.

² A. Square, "The Unemployed Conference" in *Communist*, December 3, 1921.

inscribed "From the living victims—the unemployed—to our dead comrades, who died in vain". The demonstration banners were covered with the medals of the "unemployed heroes", whilst on their lapels, in lieu of medals, the demonstrators wore pawn tickets.

The Fifth Congress of the Communist Party (Battersea, October 7–8, 1922) voted a "resolution on Unemployment"¹ calling for continued full support for the N.U.W.C.M., but opposing any trend for its development as an alternative to the trade unions:

"This Conference . . . while placing on record its appreciation of the valuable help of the N.U.W.C.M. in the task of advancing the interests of the unemployed, in preventing blacklegging against the labour unions, and in the training of large masses of the unemployed to the value of organisation, at the same time urges the N.U.W.C.M. to . . . take joint action with the Trade Unions and become attached to the local Trades and Labour Councils, to identify itself with the Bureau of the R.I.L.U., and to work side by side with the Minority Movement now operating under its leadership, for the united struggle against capitalism . . . this conference of the C.P.G.B., therefore pledges its support to the full demands of the N.U.W.C.M., and will unreservedly use the whole of its resources in the carrying out of this programme."²

*The First Hunger March*³

The last months of 1922 and the first months of 1923 saw the first of the great post-war Hunger March campaigns carried through by the N.U.W.C.M. The campaign and organisation started in September. The first contingents set out from Glasgow about 300 strong on October 17 with a 480-mile march ahead of them. Contingents from all over Britain—some 2,000 marchers in all—were to converge on London on November 17, 1922, to put before the Prime Minister the demands of the unemployed—and, *en route*, to rouse the whole country to action.

The whole march was magnificently planned. Marchers came from all areas and industries—iron and steel workers, miners and shipyard workers from Scotland; shipyard workers from the Tyne and miners from the Durham coalfields; seamen and dockers from Liverpool; iron ore miners from Cumberland; cotton workers from Lancashire;

¹ *Communist*, October 14, 1922.

² *Ibid.*

³ W. Hannington, *The Insurgents in London* (32 pp. pamphlet, N.U.W.C.M., 1923).

engineers from the Midlands; miners from South Wales. The discipline of the marchers was beyond praise, particularly as they had to face not only the hardships of the march, but attacks from the police and the provocations of sundry elements sent in from outside to try to break discipline and cause conflict.

At the beginning the capitalist press was as silent as the grave. Right-wing Labour leaders like J. H. Thomas called on the unemployed to dissociate themselves from such activities. But as silence proved ineffective in curbing the advance or the reception of the marchers, the press turned from silence to screaming horror headlines. On November 17, whilst a huge crowd awaited the arrival of the first contingents of marchers in Hyde Park, newspaper placards bore warnings of "Moscow Gold", "Secret Communist Meetings". On November 21, the *Pall Mall Gazette* came out shouting the "Great Red Plot".

November 22 was the day chosen by the Marchers' Council to send their deputation to put their case before Bonar Law, the new Prime Minister. The fact that he was unwilling to receive them did not deter them. London was filled with newspaper placards breathing disaster and bloody revolution. The *Daily Express* told of a 100,000 armed men about to storm Downing Street with telegrams ready to despatch to Moscow to report the capture of Government offices.

"Mounted and foot police were everywhere. Barricades were up at Downing Street; all gates leading from the Embankment to Whitehall were closed and padlocked . . . squads of police posted at every turning within a mile radius of Downing Street. . . ."¹

Despite all the threats, one of London's greatest demonstrations since the days of Chartism marched through London. Some 70,000 unemployed and their supporters left the Embankment towards Whitehall and thence to Hyde Park, to hear the report of the deputation that had compelled, if not the Prime Minister, then the Ministers of Labour and Health to receive them.

Originally, Sunday, November 26 had been fixed for a great farewell demonstration in Trafalgar Square, but the Marchers' Council now decided that, in view of the Prime Minister's refusal to receive a deputation, as many as possible of the marchers should stay on in London to carry on the struggle. Thus began, in fact, a period of 4-5 months of continuous campaigning around the demands of the unemployed.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Fresh bodies of marchers (reinforcements) began to take the road to London, and soon a further 1,000 were on the road. Many of the usually so stingy local authorities were now loud in their offers to pay the expenses of the marchers if they would only agree to return home. But for those that returned, new forces took their places.

On December 20, 1922, the General Council of the T.U.C. received a deputation from the marchers, and, after discussion, agreed to organise, in conjunction with the N.U.W.C.M. a National Day of Demonstration on January 7, 1923, that became known as *Unemployed Sunday*.

A central organising committee was established with equal numbers of delegates from the N.U.W.C.M., the General Council of the T.U.C., and the London Trades Council. Calls were issued for similar Committees to prepare demonstrations in other areas and towns. The Executive Committee of the Communist Party called on all organisations and members of the Party to give the fullest support to these demonstrations:

“The Communist Party has no reason to be ashamed of its work in connection with organised unemployed agitation. . . . The Communist Party *has* helped to the full extent of its power. It *has* encouraged the unemployed to organise. . . . It has supplied most of its leading spirits and it has done everything it could to keep the agitation from crumbling away under the influence of doles and despair. . . .”¹

The demonstrations were in the main extremely successful, in particular the huge meeting in Trafalgar Square with, amongst the speakers, George Lansbury, S. Saklatvala and Wal Hannington. In Glasgow, too, Communists were amongst the platform speakers, though in some towns they were refused, despite the fact that they had been the main initiators of the campaign. But the successful demonstrations of Unemployed Sunday were followed by no plans for continued struggle. Bob Smillie, the miners’ leader, had suggested at the Glasgow demonstration that strike action would be the only effective follow-up measure. The Communist Party, at the end of January 1923, also made a call for an all-in one-day strike on the unemployed demands. But the T.U.C. General Council, that had only unwillingly, under mass pressure, accepted the demonstrations, now withdrew from the struggle and there was no official follow-up.

¹ *Communist*, January 6, 1923.

Towards the end of January 1923, the N.U.W.C.M. sent out from London two groups of marchers, one north and one south, to bring back new reinforcements. Despite arrests (Hannington, for instance, was arrested at Coventry and fined at Rugby), both groups returned with new marchers in mid-February. Finally, on February 20, 1923, the Marchers' Council terminated the campaign, and the 500 remaining marchers returned home in high morale (and railway trains) with the local authorities (only too gladly) paying their fares.

This first of the great Hunger March Campaigns had done much all over the country to rouse people to the demands of the unemployed, and also to stiffen the resistance in the general working-class movement to help to "Stop The Retreat".

On April 9-11, 1923, the Third Conference of the N.U.W.C.M. was held in Coventry,¹ with 109 delegates from 74 Committees. It was able to report that some 260 Unemployed Committees were now affiliated and the organisation considerably extended. There was a certain lull in the struggle during the summer of 1923, though the N.U.W.C.M. gave valuable assistance to the strike of the dockers. With the approach of winter, the unemployed struggle developed anew.

The organisation and struggle of the unemployed in 1920-1923 brought a breath of combat and militancy to what was in general a period of retreat and defeat for the industrial working class. Nothing was more demoralising than the drab, semi-starvation monotony of life on the dole. Nothing could be more calculated to sap class feelings and to turn the unemployed into a strike-breaking reserve of the capitalist offensive. In fact, they became precisely the opposite. How did this come about?

The essential reasons lay in the *struggle* of the unemployed, and the character of the leadership that led them in that struggle. The miners, engineers and other industrial workers were *ready to fight*, but their leaders led them to conciliate, to retreat before the employers' offensive. The right-wing Labour leadership had no interest in and little influence over the unemployed movement. The dole is not a favourable condition for enthusiasm for reformism. The leadership of the unemployed movement was taken, from the beginning, by the Communist Party, along with a number of militants of the I.L.P., local Labour Parties and the trade union movement, who took the initiative in the formation, first, of the London Council of Unemployed Workers,

¹ Report of Third Conference of N.U.W.C.M., Coventry, April 9-11, 1923.

and then of the N.U.W.C.M. The unemployed struggles showed that, in fact, retreat was unnecessary. Indeed, it won a number of important victories in connection with benefits and relief.

Of course there were weaknesses and mistakes. At first there was much sectarianism in the attitude of the Communist Party, a tendency to incorporate with every call for struggle the full explanation of the capitalist origin of unemployment, and to demonstrate at the same time that the only solution lay in socialism. But, in general, such fundamental explanation was very necessary, and the Communists learned in the course of the struggle that it exerted influence to the extent that it was accompanied by practical leadership of the immediate struggle, here and now, by daily defence of the interests of the unemployed. The Communist Party began to give *both* general guidance, and, through some of its best members like Wal Hannington, practical leadership to the unemployed struggle.

There was a certain tendency inside the Communist Party to underestimate the role that could be played in the unemployed struggles by progressive local authorities, but this too, began to be corrected, and, as in the Poplar struggle, Communist Councillors played their part.

There were some trends inside the N.U.W.C.M., amongst those disgusted with the indifference of the trade union leaders towards the plight of the unemployed, to see the Unemployed Committees as an alternative to the trade union movement. The Communist Party strongly opposed such trends, and, perhaps the greatest role of the N.U.W.C.M. in these days was its fight against blacklegging in the various industrial struggles, like the fight of the miners, engineers and dockers—swelling the picket line instead of breaking the strike. The unemployed struggle was a living example of the policy of united front. Communists, militants of the I.L.P., and Labour Party, trade unionists and non-organised workers, fought side by side, often under fire from the right-wing leaders, and always under fire from capitalism, its police and its press.

The struggle of the unemployed was a patch of light in the darkness of these years of retreat before the capitalist offensive. It was a symbol of the contrast between militant Communist leadership and the misleadership of right-wing reformism. It is significant that the biggest demonstrations of this whole period took place under the leadership of the, as yet, small Communist Party. Communists like Wal Hannington and Tom Mann (whose work in the field of the unemployed has

never been fully appreciated) served well the whole British working-class movement.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Russian Famine Campaign, July 1921-July 1922

In the spring of 1921 a disastrous drought laid waste a vast area in the south-eastern provinces of European Russia and the western provinces of southern Siberia, an area, mainly in the valley of the Volga river, populated by over 20 millions. Harvests, reduced to 10-15 per cent of normal, were in places, non-existent. Famine stalked the land.¹

The *Communist*,² in a special issue on the famine, of August 27, 1921, described how months of intense drought were followed by an exceptionally dry winter. Rainfall in some of the affected provinces fell from the normal average of 14 inches to under 3 inches. The land was parched; the crops withered up; spring-sown crops failed.

The scourge of nature had been aided by the hand of man. The drought-stricken area had been the scene of some of the worst destruction of the Civil War. The United States' "Russian Commission of Near East Relief", consisting of experts and former state officials, travelled almost 5,000 miles through the famine areas in mid-1921. Their report³ stressed again and again the ravages of the war and of the White Armies in the Volga Valley. The famine provinces suffered sorely in the course of the war:

"... Since then the Volga country has suffered under the force of political ambitions. In 1918, the States of Samara and Ufa were the battle-grounds of the Czechoslovaks. The city of Samara was partially sacked and hundreds of farms were destroyed. In 1919 the army of Kolchak passed over the same ground, and, further south, Denikin's troops lived on the grain that the people had grown, and seized their horses. ... With peace in Russia came the droughts of 1920 and 1921. ... Those who had survived the ravages of war died in thousands of pestilence and famine."⁴

The White Armies left little standing:

"In the Districts where Denikin's army operated scarcely a station

¹ Andrew Rothstein, *A History of the USSR*, Penguin Books, pp. 149-151.

² *Communist*, No. 56, August 27, 1921.

³ See full text reproduced in *Communist Review*, April 1922 (pp. 426-468 in bound volume for 1922).

⁴ Summary of Commission Report in *Manchester Guardian*, January 13, 1922.

or a water tank is left standing, and there is not a single bridge, even including the great railway bridge over the Don at Chir, which has not been damaged or blown up.”¹

And to the ravages of war, civil war and drought was added the effect of the economic boycott applied by the Western Powers to Soviet Russia. Prior to World War I, Russia imported about half her agricultural machinery. During the war, little such equipment was produced and virtually none imported. The result was that Soviet Russia, instead of the normal 7–8 million ploughs possessed in 1913, had less than 3 million in 1921.² Ploughs, grain-seed and other supplies were prevented from entering Leningrad by the British blockade. The American Commission reported:

“In the creation of the circumstances which have brought about their (the Soviet people’s) suffering, the United States has not been altogether guiltless. It has been a party, with other nations, in maintaining an economic blockade of Russia which has made it difficult, when not impossible for the Russian people to work out their own salvation. . . . There has been a wrong here which is not in harmony with the high ideals of the brotherhood of man. . . .”³

No one could plead ignorance of the fact that millions of men, women and children in the famine areas were dying of starvation. A whole number of organisations, philanthropic and political, sent missions of investigation and began to collect relief. The Soviet Government granted them every facility and gratefully received the aid. On August 20, 1921, the Soviet Government signed an agreement at Riga with the American Relief Administration for distribution of aid. A week later a similar agreement was signed with Dr. Nansen, the famous Norwegian explorer and humanitarian.⁴

Funds and relief materials were collected by the “Save the Children Fund”, the “Friends’ Emergency and War Victims Relief Committee”, which was supported by the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.), and the Communist International. A number of governments organised relief funds. But many in high places saw the famine

¹ Report of U.S. Russian Commission reported in *Communist Review*, April 1922, p. 443.

² W. P. and Zelda Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, Vol. I, Lawrence & Wishart, 1943, p. 55.

³ *Communist Review*, April 1922, op. cit.

⁴ Andrew Rothstein, op. cit.

as a godsent opportunity to denigrate the Soviet Government, to starve it into surrender to capitalism, to impose conditions that meant, in fact, the abandonment of its national sovereignty. As always under capitalism, high-sounding phrases became in practice the cover for mean and murky machinations. "This is so appalling a disaster," proclaimed Lloyd George in the House of Commons in July 1921, "that it ought to sweep every prejudice out of one's mind and only appeal to one emotion—pity and human sympathy." *The Times* was at least more honest:

"The whole conception of providing international credit for Russia demands the most careful scrutiny. For it means one of two things. It may mean unconditional and unguaranteed credit for the relief of the victims of famine and the reconstruction of Russia under the present Bolshevik régime. In other words, it would mean maintaining the Bolsheviks in power at the moment when their misdeeds have wrought themselves out in their inevitable consequences and are threatening the collapse of the whole hateful and criminal system. To any such attempt we are most emphatically and resolutely opposed."¹

The capitalist press lost no opportunity not only of using the appalling misery caused by the drought to slander the Soviet régime, but of slandering equally those humanitarians who set out to bring relief to the inhabitants of the stricken areas. The *Communist*, in its issue of January 28, 1922, printed an article from the Norwegian *Social-Demokraten* by Dr. Nansen. Twenty-seven million people were living on the edge of famine, he wrote, of whom 14-20 million faced almost certain death if help was not forthcoming from abroad:

"I have seen how the famine has eaten into the people. When we arrived there in September (1921) the deaths were not very numerous. In October, the conditions grew worse, and by November, people began to die around us, and in December the conditions were indescribable. *Had help been given when we asked for it the first time, then all those tens of thousands who have suffered terrible deaths from hunger could have been saved.* Even now many can be saved."²

Like the members of the American Relief Mission, Dr. Nansen showed how the ravages of Denikin and Kolchak and the Great Powers' blockade had contributed to the effects of the drought. Like

¹ *The Times*, August 25, 1921 Editorial.

² *Communist*, January 28, 1922.

them, too, he had nothing but praise for the efforts of the Soviet Government to alleviate the famine conditions and relieve the victims:

“It is asked: what has the Soviet Government done to mitigate the suffering? They have done everything in their power. There is no doubt about that. . . .”¹

And he turned his fire against the capitalist countries whose granaries were bursting with surplus grain, the capitalist governments that refused relief, the capitalist press that smeared the relievers:

“. . . It is this suffering the West European governments have not found it worth their while to mitigate. It is this bottomless hell our own bourgeois farmyard has cackled and sneered at. It is the drooping, fainting Russian mother and her dying child about whom the overfed West End lady and her ditto husband have said, ‘Serves them right. It is their own fault. They have not rid themselves of the Bolsheviks!’

“Had we received what we asked for in September, all this suffering could have been avoided. And we asked for no more than five million pounds. Half the cost of a modern battleship. . . .

“Furthermore, we have continually been persecuted by our infamous, lying press, which against its better knowing, has carried on its irresponsible propaganda. Hindrances have been put in our way by influential Russian émigrés who are much more interested in overthrowing their political opponents than in helping their starving and dying countrymen. . . .”

“We know there is more corn in the world than we can in any way consume. In the Argentine, the maize is used as fuel. In Russia the dying millions are eating weeds and clay. Canada also can export corn far in excess of what is needed to save Russia.”

On August 25, 1921, the Allied Supreme Council in Paris appointed a Commission to study the question of relief to the victims of the Volga famine.² The Commission in its turn appointed a Sub-Commission to visit the famine areas, under the chairmanship of Monsieur Noulens, former French Ambassador, who in 1918 had been one of the main organisers of subversion and intervention. Included in the Sub-Commission were a number of businessmen who had lost profitable investments as a result of the October Revolution.

¹ Ibid.

² For details of Commission and consequences see A. R. Rothstein, *op. cit.*, p. 150; W. P. and Zelda Coates, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–58.

Early in September, whilst millions were starving and tens of thousands dying, the Sub-Commission demanded as a prerequisite for any possible aid that a special investigating committee should study conditions in the Soviet Union, a demand that was rejected by the Soviet Government.

Little more was heard of Monsieur Noulens' Sub-Commission. Whatever else it did, it brought no food. But the main Commission was expanded into the "International Russian Famine Relief Commission" on which sat representatives from most European governments.

It met early in October, 1921, in Brussels, and, while stressing the urgent need for aid, it demanded, as a condition, that the Soviet Government should recognise the Tsarist debts and accept the Commission of Investigation.

Whilst a number of governments individually gave relief to the stricken population, the Commission itself acted mainly as an obstacle. The British Government, despite the fine words of Mr. Lloyd George, distinguished itself for its meanness while showing an unbridled generosity to the White Russian émigrés. The *Communist* commented:

"British, French, American and Tsarist intriguers are all hoping under the guise of relief work, to establish some counter-revolutionary movement in the famine areas. Possibly they also hope to renew foreign invasions. . . . Capital's war on revolution is unrelenting; famine is a good opportunity for the genius of a Churchill."

The Communist Party in Britain launched a campaign of relief as soon as it received the news of the sufferings of the population in the famine areas. Tom Mann, a foundation member of the Party, was one of the first to visit the stricken areas and appeal for aid.¹ On August 20, 1921, Arthur MacManus, the Party's Chairman, advanced the outlines of the campaign:²

"The task of the Party will be twofold. Firstly to assist in organising all possible material aid for those dying from hunger. Secondly, to combat with all our strength the vicious lies being circulated once again about Soviet Russia, and to explain to British workers the truth about the famine."³

The Executive Committee of the Party decided to organise a special

¹ Tom Mann, *Russia in 1921*, published by British Bureau of R.I.L.U. (55 pp.).

² *Communist*, August 13, 1921, "Notes of the Week—The Russian Famine".

³ *Ibid.*, August 20, 1921.

Russian Famine Relief week from August 21 to August 26, 1921, in which all Branches would be called upon to hold meetings and collections. A Relief Fund and Committee were established under Party auspices, which after September 1921, became part of the Workers' International Famine Relief Committee, with its centre in Berlin. Incomplete reports of the Russian Famine Relief Week showed that it was the first national co-ordinated campaign organised by the Party.¹ Reports were received by the Executive of nearly 500 meetings up and down the country, along with hundreds of socials and bazaars to raise funds. In London, members of the West London Branch levied themselves 5s. a week as long as the need should last. The Bethnal Green Branch held a big public meeting addressed by the mayor. The Glasgow Division of the Party distributed 20,000 leaflets and organised over 200 local meetings and workshop collections, culminating in a large public demonstration on Glasgow Green on August 28. The Edinburgh Branch members agreed to subscribe one hour's wages a week for five weeks. More than 150 meetings were held in the Midlands, and 50,000 leaflets distributed in Lancashire.

By September 10, the fund reached £320.² By the end of the month it passed the £1,000 mark,³ and by the end of October £2,000.⁴ Edgar Lansbury subscribed £10 from prison, writing that as the Government (as a result of the Popular struggle) was paying for the upkeep of himself and his wife, "... we think that the best thing we can do with the money which His Majesty has saved us, is to send it to your fund. I am not sure that it ought not to be acknowledged as from His Majesty."⁵

By November the fund reached £2,500.⁶ By now numbers of contributions were coming in from Branches of the A.E.U., E.T.U., N.A.F.T.A., A.S.L.E.F., S.W.M.F., etc. Early in December it passed the £3,000 mark.⁷

By March 1922 the total had passed £5,000, and by September 1922 reached £8,300.⁸ For a small party, in view of the extremely low level of wages, the wide extent of unemployment (and of course the high value of the pound compared with today), this was in itself a very considerable achievement.

¹ *Communist*, August 27, 1921.

² *Ibid.*, September 10, 1921.

³ *Ibid.*, September 24, 1921.

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 29, 1921.

⁵ *Ibid.*, October 22, 1921.

⁶ *Ibid.*, November 12, 1921.

⁷ *Ibid.*, December 3, 1921.

⁸ Report of National E.C. to the Fifth Congress of C.P.G.B., October 7–8, 1922, Battersea.

The campaigning and collections took all sorts of forms. Flag Days were organised (Falkirk),¹ street collections and collections at railway stations, including a collection of jewellery. A number of famous singers and artistes, including John Goss and Elsa Lanchester, gave concerts in aid of the fund. By November 1921, the Workers' International Famine Relief Committee had collected over £40,000 and despatched five food ships to Soviet Russia. By April 1922, it had collected over £300,000 and sent 86 food ships or trains laden with supplies.² May 1-17, 1922 was fixed as an international tool-collecting week³ and from that time collection of tools became a regular part of the campaign.

By mid-1922 it became necessary to turn the character of relief campaigning from collection of food to measures for the care of children and for the restoration of the economy of the famine areas. The new lines of the campaign were worked out at the Third Congress of the Workers' International Famine Relief Committee held at Berlin in July 1922 and at the subsequent meeting of its Executive in October.⁴ Henceforth the campaign took three main forms.

First the establishment of Children's Homes. The W.I.R.C. agreed to accept responsibility for 20,000 children—feeding, clothing, educating them, and also furnishing the homes supplied by the Soviet Government. The responsibility for 500 of these children was accepted by British supporters.

Secondly, a food parcels organisation was established and the British Committee began to collect for despatch of ten-shilling parcels of flour, sugar, condensed milk, tea, tinned meat, etc.

Finally, a loan of 1,000,000 dollars was launched, bearing 5 per cent interest and repayable in January 1933, to provide money and tools for Soviet factories. A British quota was agreed at £20,000, and a Committee set up to organise its collection, with George Lansbury, Alex Gossip, David Kirkwood, J Bromley and A. A. Purcell amongst the sponsors. For this the Communist Party gave every support.

The record of the C.P.G.B. in the Russian Famine Relief Campaign was a very creditable one for so young an organisation. Other and wealthier organisations collected more money. But it was the Communist Party that responded quickest and which took the initiative in raising the issue in the labour movement. The Party organised a cam-

¹ *Communist*, October 29, 1921.

² *Ibid.*, April 29, 1922.

³ *Ibid.*, April 1, 1922.

⁴ Report of National Executive to Fifth Congress C.P.G.B.

paign of relief *without strings and conditions*. It held meetings on the issue at thousands of factories, workshops, trade union gatherings, and in so doing pierced, at least to some extent, the barrage of lies and slanders directed against the Soviet régime by British reaction.

The campaign initiated by the Party, the role of the Party press, showed that the conception of proletarian internationalism, of international working-class solidarity, had won meaning for the Party, not only in words but in deeds that demanded a direct and personal sacrifice.

*Fight Against War in the Near East, September–October 1922*¹

The Communist Party of Great Britain was founded in the midst of one of the most courageous, united and victorious of the struggles for peace ever carried out by the British working class and people. The Polish aggression on Russia was brought to nought, but the struggle against imperialist war was to remain at the centre of the life and activity of British Communists, to be repeated and repeated in different forms. The first three years of the Party's existence were no exception.

One of the first sharp battles for peace took place around the position of Turkey in the Near East, coming to a critical head towards the end of 1922.

Turkey, with its extended possessions in Europe and Asia, its Arab empire, its rich raw materials, its key strategic position linking Europe and Asia and overhanging the Straits had long been coveted by rival imperialist powers—not only by the old Tsarist rulers, not only by Germany with its dreams of the Berlin–Baghdad railway, not only by Italy and France, but also by Britain.

When the war ended with Turkey defeated, British ruling circles—united on the need to dismember the old Turkish Empire and greedy for new annexations and spheres of influence—found themselves disunited on the exact form and features of the dismemberment and share out.

Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, Balfour, Birkenhead and others, dreamed of despoiling Turkey of its European possessions, including Constantinople and control of the Straits, together with a great carve-up of parts of Turkey in Asia, especially its former Arab territories. France and Italy were to get a share, but Britain a decisive portion. Greece, virtually a political and economic extension of the British

¹ For general background see: Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars, 1918–40*, Methuen, 1956 reprint, pp. 112–118. *Noveiskaya Istoriya Anglii*, V. G. Trukhanovsky, pp. 80–82.

Empire, and especially favoured by Lloyd George, was to come in on the ground floor of the share-out—in fact as an indirect extension of British influence.

Lord Curzon, certainly no enemy of extending British rule, opposed too drastic a partition of Turkey's Asian possessions and too great generosity towards Greece, Italy and France. Lord Reading, India's Viceroy, was against too excessive a dismemberment of Turkey. All, whatever their tactical divisions, were anxious that, in some form, Turkish soil should be used as a bastion against Soviet Russia, which should be denied free use of the Straits and confined within the Black Sea.

In the winter of 1918 Britain occupied Constantinople, allowing the old discredited Sultan to stay on as a convenient puppet, and bringing a few French regiments into the city to give it an appearance of Entente occupation. The Turkish capital (then Constantinople) and Government came under Allied control, the Straits under Allied domination, and parts of the coastal area in Asia under Allied occupation.

In 1919 Greek armies, egged on by Lloyd George, occupied East Thrace (Turkey in Europe) and invaded Turkey in Asia Minor.

But one factor, omitted in all the calculations of British imperialism, was the Turkish people themselves. With the disembarkation of Greek forces at Smyrna (Izmir), Turkish forces rallied under Mustapha Kemal, resistance developed, and in April 1920, an alternative government was formed at Ankara (Angora), the Grand National Assembly leading the struggle for Turkish national sovereignty.

The Treaty of Sèvres of August 1920, signed between the Entente and the helpless puppet Sultan, in theory accepted the dismemberment of Turkey, the Allied occupation, the establishment of a so-called "neutral zone" on the west coast of Turkey in Asia, but in fact it drove any Turkish people who still gave wavering support to the old Sultanate to pass over to the side of resistance under the Grand National Assembly.

Lloyd George's pretext was "the freedom of the Straits". But such "freedom" of the Straits meant the *denial of freedom* to Turkey, Russia and the other Black Sea powers, whose interests were the only ones essentially concerned:

"It was Allied control of the Straits, and that alone, that closed them to peaceful Russian commerce all through 1919 and 1920 and opened them to French battleships and British munition ships bring-

ing aid to Denikin and Wrangel. It was Allied control of the Straits that in 1921 and 1922 closed them to peaceful Turkish merchant vessels . . . and opened them to Greek warships for the purpose of bombarding harmless fishing villages on the coast of Anatolia. And it was Allied control of the Straits, with the 'neutral zone' arbitrarily set up along the Asiatic side, that prevented the Turks from completing the rout of the Greek armies which had invaded their territory. . . ."¹

Encouraged by Lloyd George, a new Greek offensive against Turkey started in the summer of 1921, aimed at Ankara, and was met with determined resistance by the Turkish forces under Mustapha Kemal. Hostility to Lloyd George's policy and his aims of a "Great Greece" under British protection was fast developing within the Entente. Italy began to withdraw its forces from Turkey, and, in October 1921, France concluded an agreement with Turkey, still further undermining the Treaty of Sèvres.

Meanwhile the Soviet Union had taken a clear stand in favour of Turkish national sovereignty and the genuine freedom of the Straits. In April 1920, Mustapha Kemal had written to Lenin proposing the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the new Turkey and Soviet Russia, and requesting help in the resistance to imperialism. On March 16, 1921, a Treaty of Friendship and Brotherhood was signed between Turkey and the R.S.F.S.R.², followed on October 13, 1921 by a further Treaty between Turkey and the Transcaucasian Soviet Republics.³

The Greeks suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the Turkish forces. On August 8, 1922, they were streaming back to the coast, hotly pursued by Kemal's troops, who entered Smyrna on September 9, and then turned northwards towards the Straits, where, in the village of Chanak, British occupation forces were stationed. The issue was: would the victorious Turkish armies continue their advance and move northwards into the "neutral" occupied zone that stretched from the Dardanelles to the Black Sea along the sea of Marmora?

The British Government despatched an ultimatum forbidding the Turks to advance further towards Chanak. The Turkish advance continued. Lloyd George threatened war, and, in mid-September 1922, the

¹ C. M. Roebuck (Andrew Rothstein), in *Communist*, October 7, 1922.

² *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 237–242.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 263–269.

situation was tense. The threat of war met with opposition both from Britain's allies abroad and from working people at home. The Dominions, especially Canada, opposed war. Yugoslavia and Rumania, invited to give military support, rejected the invitation. Within Britain opposition speedily spread, with the voice of the Communist Party the most clear and consistent for peace.

The Communist Party had done its best to warn in good time of the war danger that inevitably arose from imperialist intrigue in the Near East, and above all from the policy of Lloyd George. The *Communist Review*, monthly theoretical journal of the Party, had run a special series of articles dealing with British imperialist policy towards Greece and Turkey.¹ The *Review* was attacked at the time for paying too much attention to the Near East by certain Labour and I.L.P. circles who were directing their fire against the role of France, forgetting that the main danger in the Near East lay with *British* imperialism.²

On Sunday, September 17, 1922, the Executive Committee of the Communist Party unanimously adopted a resolution for opposition to the threatened war with Turkey:³

"The Executive Committee of the C.P.G.B. in view of the gravity of the situation in the Near East occasioned by the massing of British forces to defend their utterly unwarrantable tenure of Constantinople and the Straits, calls upon the members of the Party to adopt a militant attitude inside and outside of the workshops against those responsible for the campaign of hatred and aggression against the Turkish people. . . ."

At the same time it urged the Labour Party Executive to call national and international conferences of all working-class organisations to devise ways and means of establishing a united front against war.⁴ A series of Communist meetings and demonstrations were organised the following week-end (September 23-24),⁵ under the slogan of "Stop The War".

A strong feeling against the war spread very rapidly in the labour movement of Britain, and internationally. There was pressure on the official Labour leadership for some form of protest and of action. The

¹ *Communist Review*, July 1922, "High Finance and Foreign Politics—Putting the Ottoman Empire Into Pawn", by J. T. Walton Newbold; September, "The Greek Grain Kings", by J. T. Walton Newbold; "The New Fight in Constantinople", by A. Rosenberg; October, "The Berlin-Baghdad Railway", by J. T. Walton Newbold.

² *Communist Review*, October 1922, Editorial, "The Near East".

³ *Communist*, September 23, 1922.

⁴ *Ibid.*, September 23, 1922.

⁵ *Ibid.*, September 30, 1922.

National Joint Council of Labour, representing the General Council of the T.U.C., the E.C. of the Labour Party, and the Parliamentary Labour Party issued a manifesto calling for withdrawal of troops from the Chanak area, both by the Allies and the Turkish forces, for a National Conference and for the summoning of Parliament.¹ On September 26, the Second International issued a manifesto also calling for the struggle against the war.¹

The Communist Party, through its Secretary, Albert Inkpin, addressed a statement to the Bureau of the Second International² giving general support to the manifesto and, in particular, to the section that stated that “it would be an unpardonable crime against humanity should new hostilities commence”, and called on all labour and socialist bodies to “use every ounce of their strength, political and industrial to avert war”. Enclosing a copy of the appeal to the Labour Party, Inkpin suggested the summoning in Britain of *Councils of Action*, nationally and locally, of the type that had proved so successful in curbing British intervention against Soviet Russia in 1920.

Inkpin’s letter emphasised the need for *international* action against war and suggested an international conference of “all political and industrial working-class organisations”. He appealed to the Bureau of the Second International to get together for common action with the Communist International, the Vienna Working Union (“Two-and-a-half” International), with the Amsterdam International Federation of Trade Unions (I.F.T.U.) and the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.) with its centre in Moscow.³

Meanwhile the Party called on its Branches to work for the establishment of Councils of Action in every locality and to campaign for:

- (1) Immediate withdrawal of British troops to the European side of the Straits, so as to avoid any conflict with Turkish national forces on what was their rightful territory.
- (2) Summoning without delay of an international conference of governments, including the Soviet Union, Turkey and other Black Sea states, to settle the territory of the former Turkish Empire, and determine the régime of the Straits.
- (3) Unequivocal declaration by the British Government of the full rights of the Turkish people to self-determination and national independence.

¹ *Daily Herald*, September 26, 1922.

² *Communist*, October 2, 1922.

³ *Ibid.*, October 7, 1922.

(4) The immediate convening of a national Council of Action to take the necessary steps to enforce such a policy on the British Government.¹

The Communist Party continued to organise meetings and demonstrations against the war in the main industrial centres, including Glasgow, Dundee, Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham and Leeds.² And the fight against war in the Near East was one of the main themes (outside the discussion of Party reorganisation) at the Fifth Congress of the Party at Battersea on October 14, 1922. It was one of the key issues treated in the opening remarks of the Chairman, Arthur MacManus, and a special resolution adopted stressed that the war danger was not over, that all Entente troops should be withdrawn from the Dardanelles, and demanded the recognition of the Ankara Government and of Turkey's right to national sovereignty.³

Internal and external opposition to Lloyd George's policy in the Near East brought the threat of war, provisionally, to an end.

On October 11, 1922, the Convention of Mudania was signed, and a truce agreed between Greece and Turkey, by which Greek forces were to evacuate East Thrace. In mid-November the puppet Sultan was quietly removed to Malta in the British warship, H.M.S. *Malaya*, one of the first of that museum of rejected royalty that Britain was to assemble. Wider negotiations opened in Lausanne in the course of November. British imperialism had been decisively defeated. Lloyd George was obliged to resign.

Hands off the Ruhr!

The fight for peace is an uninterrupted struggle. The threat of imperialist war arises now in one, now in another point of the globe.

The Communist Party of Great Britain and the whole international Communist movement, which, in the latter part of 1922, had been straining every effort to prevent the crisis in the Near East from developing into a new world conflict, had to turn their attention, with the New Year, 1923, to the position in the Ruhr.

The immediate pretext for the French invasion of the Ruhr District was the German failure to meet the massive reparations payments decided at Versailles. On December 26, 1922, at the instance of France, the Reparations Commission declared Germany in default on deliveries of timber. On January 9, 1923, coal deliveries were declared in default. Two days later, on January 11, French and Belgian troops began their entry into the Ruhr.

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., October 7, 1922.

³ Ibid., October 14, 1922.

Not that this was in any sense a surprise or unforeseen move. The necessary pretext could always be discovered. The French capitalists had made their intentions clear enough, and the working class of Europe had been warned time and again by the Communist Parties. Indeed, on January 6, 1923, an International Conference, deliberating at Essen in the heart of the Ruhr,¹ had sounded the warning. Attended by Communist Party representatives from Belgium, Britain, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Holland and Italy, along with militant French and German trade unionists and delegates from the Red International of Trade Unions and the Young Communist International, the main emphasis had been struggle against the Versailles Treaty. But Cachin of France, the first speaker, had warned of the impending French aggression, and William Gallacher of the British Party (who was accompanied by J. Walton Newbold, M.P.) called for the sharpest and most rapid resistance to any such step. The conference manifesto "To The Working People of the Allied and Vanquished Countries"² warned that occupation of the Ruhr would mean danger of a new war:

"It will increase the antagonisms between the different states, and reawaken nationalist passions to the highest degree. It will let loose reaction on both sides of the frontier and clear the path for every type of Fascism."

The Manifesto called for united resistance to any such step:

". . . to confront the united offensive of the bourgeoisie with an equally united defence of the fraternally allied working people."

Conflict on the Ruhr between the rival French and German imperialisms was, of course, nothing new. The Ruhr was the greatest coking-coalfield in Europe; one of the largest steel producing areas; one of the most modern centres of internal transport (railway, road, river and canal) in the whole world. By the irony of history the coalfields of the Ruhr and the Saar complemented the iron ore of Lorraine and of Longwy-Briey. Under socialism the solution would have been simple, peaceful, and based on mutual co-operation. But the only solution of

¹ *International Press Correspondence* (Special Number) Vol. III, No. 4 of January 10, 1923.

² *Communist*, February 3, 1923, "Why the Ruhr?" and M. Philips Price, *Germany in Transition*, Labour Publishing Co. Ltd., 1923.

imperialism was that one should swallow the other, and this had long been the declared aim of both French and German imperialism. Domination of the whole area was as much the content of the Stresemann Report to the German Government of May 1915, as it was the essence, seven years later, of the Dariac Report to the French Government. Both demanded the "union of the coke and iron ore". They differed only on the aegis under which such union was to be accomplished.

After Versailles, France obtained the whole of the Lorraine and control of the Saar coalfield. But this did not suffice. According to the *Bulletin*, organ of the Comité des Forges, of April 12, 1923, French industry still required an annual delivery of some 6-7 million tons of Ruhr coke to keep her smelting plants in action.¹ And now French capitalism saw a golden opportunity.

Their British rivals were perched on the horns of a dilemma. Deeply involved in the Near East, their interests were divided.

They feared, of course, any strengthening of the French industrialists. They feared, too, that resistance in the Ruhr, and the resulting paralysis, would mean a loss of British export markets. But, in exchange, British coalowners could only look forward to a temporary crisis in the Ruhr coalfield, and the lessening of competition that this was bound to represent. In this sense, Germany's disaster could well mean a British boom.²

So the British Government took no part in the Ruhr occupation, but equally took no part in resisting it. Though the British occupation zone in the Rhineland stood between the French occupation zone and the Ruhr, French troops were permitted free passage.

The Communist Party of Great Britain, like the whole international Communist movement, went into action from the first days of the French occupation of the Ruhr. Announcing, on January 13, 1923, that French troops were reported to be entering the Ruhr, the *Communist* emphasised the danger of war and that the main responsibility for combating it lay with the working class.³ A few days later, when the facts became established, the Communist Party called for joint action against war and for the withdrawal of all troops from the Ruhr "with any working-class body that is prepared to make a stand" and began,

¹ M. Philips Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144.

² M. Philips Price, "The Coal War in Europe", *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, March 1923.

³ *Communist*, January 13, 1923.

itself, to organise mass demonstrations in the main industrial centres of Britain.

On January 27, 1923 the Political Bureau of the Party issued an appeal to all sections of the Labour Movement in Britain¹ to campaign to repudiate the Versailles Treaty, to call an international conference of all working-class organisations for action against the occupation of the Ruhr and for the immediate withdrawal of *all* foreign troops from *all* the occupied areas of Germany. The Party made it quite clear that it was fighting not only for the withdrawal of French, but also for the recall of *British* troops. This call was repeated and strengthened in a manifesto "Stop the March to Ruin" issued in the name of the Executive Committee in the first days of February.²

Further demonstrations were organised in industrial areas, some of which, like that at Dundee, achieved a fair degree of unity.³

Meanwhile similar campaigns, some of which, as in France, were carried out in the teeth of every type of police repression, were taking place in most European countries under the leadership of the Communist Parties. The French Communist Party gave a magnificent example by turning its offensive against the main aggression—the French capitalists led by Poincaré. It distributed a manifesto to the French occupation troops under the slogan "The German Workers are your Brothers—Fraternise!" Leaders of the Party and the militant trade unions (C.G.T.U.), like Marcel Cachin and Monmousseau, were arrested. Gabriel Péri declared hunger strike in prison. Dozens of French revolutionary soldiers were given long sentences.⁴

An international conference on the Ruhr situation, called on the initiative of the Ruhr Shop Stewards, was prohibited from meeting at Cologne on March 8 by the British occupation authorities. But, on March 17, the conference was held at Frankfurt-am-Main.⁵ Attended by over 250 delegates, its aim was to work out the lines of an international campaign to end the occupation of the Ruhr. Delegates were present from the Communist International (Kolarov), from R.I.L.U. (Lozovsky), and from many Communist Parties. J. Walton Newbold, M.P. and a Y.C.L. representative attended from Britain. A prominent

¹ *Ibid.*, January 27, 1923.

² *Ibid.*, February 3, 1923.

³ The Dundee meeting was jointly organised by C.P., Trades and Labour Council and Unemployed Committee, but the I.L.P. refused support.

⁴ Maurice Thorez, "Le Quarantième Anniversaire du Parti Communiste Français", *Cahiers du Bolshévisme*, October 1960.

⁵ *Workers' Weekly*, March 31 and April 7, 1923; *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 4, No. 5, May 1923, "The Frankfurt Conference".

member of the German Social-Democratic Party took the chair, but the Social Democratic Internationals and Parties refused official representation.

The main slogan of the campaign, it was agreed, should be "*Evacuation of the Occupied Territory*". An international Committee of Action of 25 members was elected to lead the campaign from day to day. The conference agreed, moreover, that a new approach for joint action should be made to the International Federation of Trade Unions (Amsterdam), the Second International (London) and the Vienna ("Two-and-a-Half") International. Harry Pollitt was later delegated by the Committee to appeal in their name for joint action to the Hamburg Congress, where, at the beginning of June 1923, the amalgamation of the Second and "Two-and-a-Half" Internationals was taking place.¹ It was agreed, too, that April 15-22, 1923, should become an International Week of Action for the evacuation of the Ruhr by foreign troops.

The Communist International and the various Communist Parties had appealed, from the first days of the Ruhr crisis, for united action of all sections of the working-class movement. But, whilst they received quite considerable support in their campaigns from the rank and file, from the official social-democratic leaders there was nothing but refusal. There was, indeed, a wide gap between social-democratic *promises* before the Ruhr occupation and social-democratic action when the crisis dawned.

Already, the previous September, Edo Fimmen, Secretary of the Amsterdam International, had proclaimed at a Berlin demonstration:²

"I may remind you that when the occupation of the Ruhr area was proposed before, we did our utmost to prevent it, and went so far as to be ready to reply with a general strike in the case of occupation. . . . Tonight, I declare, on behalf of 25 million organised workers, that should an invasion of the Ruhr areas be again threatened, the International Trade Union Federation will do its duty.

Three months later the Hague Peace Conference,³ called on the initiative of the reformist internationals, which had duly invited the Soviet Trade Unions, but refused invitations to the Communist Parties

¹ *International Press Correspondence*, Vol. 3, No. 41, June 7, 1923.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, No. 13, February 6, 1923.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, No. 8, January 19-21, 1923—"Open Letter of Communist International to London, Vienna and Amsterdam Internationals", and *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, March 1923, "Notes of the Month".

and to R.I.L.U., decided, in the loftiest terms, that any threat of war would be met with international general strike. The Soviet trade unions warned clearly enough that the New Year would certainly see the French occupation of the Ruhr and proposed, without avail, January 3 for an international protest strike. Now, when the occupation had come and war threatened, the reformists were silent and inactive.

On January 13, 1923, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (E.C.C.I.) called for the fulfilment of the Hague pledge of general strike, but again, without result. On January 16, the E.C.C.I. again appealed for joint strike action on January 31, but still in vain.

Indeed, the official Social Democratic Parties were far more inclined to support their own particular ruling classes than to take action against them. Whilst leading French Communists were imprisoned for protesting against their Government's occupation of the Ruhr, the French Socialist Party made vague appeals to an inactive League of Nations. German and British reformist leaders united to condemn the French intervention forgetting the connivance of their own governments. Edo Fimmen, who had uttered such brave words in the name of his International the previous September, was forced to admit in February 1923, speaking to the French Trades Union Congress (C.G.T.)¹ that I.F.T.U. was betraying its impotence:

"It must be recognised that we have not been able to do what we said we would do. There is a danger that the present International may prove as helpless in facing this crisis as the old International was in 1914."

In Britain the picture was in no way different.² The Labour Party leaders were quite willing to attack French intervention, but quite unwilling to condemn the role of their *own* government, their *own* occupation troops, or the Versailles Treaty of which the French invasion was a natural corollary. Ramsay MacDonald defended reparations. J. R. Clynes called for the intervention of the Government of the United States. A group of I.L.P. leaders called for the "internationalisation of the Ruhr". Both Labour Party and Independent Labour Party refused, again and again, to take joint action with the Communist Party. Both refused the appeal of the Ruhr Shop Stewards to attend the conference at Frankfurt. Above all, the official reformist leaders and

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, February 10, 1923.

² *Communist*, January 20, 1923; *International Press Correspondence*, Vol. 3, No. 25, March 13, 1923—"British Labour and the Ruhr", by J. T. Murphy.

organisations in Britain defended the maintenance of British troops in the Rhineland. The T. & G.W.U. deputation, for instance, that visited the Ruhr areas at the end of May 1923, headed by Ben Tillett, M.P., and A. Creech Jones, reported:

"We feel it would be disastrous for our prestige and good name to withdraw before a settlement of the Ruhr and Rhineland was arrived at."¹

Once again the task of organising the fight for peace was left to the Communist Party supported by many militants from different sections of the British labour movement.

THE CURZON ULTIMATUM OF 1923

Whilst the campaign against the occupation of the Ruhr was in full swing, a new and still more serious threat of war caused the Communist Party and Labour Movement in Britain to turn their attention again to the question of Anglo-Russian relations.

The year 1922 saw the stabilisation and steady strengthening of the internal economic and political position of the Soviet Republic. The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (U.S.S.R.) was established. The British Government, both in sorrow and in anger, was obliged to revise its ideas about the much-prophesied "collapse" of Russia, and to change its conception of the character of the New Economic Policy (N.E.P.), which it had hitherto likened to a retreat back to capitalism. The first war of intervention had ignominiously failed. In 1921 an Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement had been negotiated. Now, once again, die-hard groupings within British and world capitalism were looking for pretexts to break off trade relations and even to launch a new military intervention.

The early months of 1923 saw a steady deterioration in the official British attitude to Russia. An era opened which Mr. Lloyd George aptly named "frost-bitten diplomacy".² By April of that year it became clear that Lord Curzon, the British Foreign Minister, was preparing some new anti-Soviet coup. The capitalist press was, even more

¹ Ben Tillett, M.P., A. Creech Jones, and Samuel Warren, *The Ruhr*, Labour Publishing Company, 1923, p. 53.

² For an excellent and detailed account of the whole episode of the 1923 Curzon Ultimatum see W. P. and Zelda Coates' *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, chapter V, Lawrence and Wishart, 1943.

than usual, venomous on every aspect of Soviet affairs. The *Workers' Weekly* warned:¹

“In many quarters the expectation is held that a new armed attack is being contemplated against Soviet Russia. . . . The campaign of lies is just a preparation.”

All that was needed was a pretext. And pretexts, once pursued, are never difficult to discover. Three of them—all equally thin—were sufficient to work up the necessary anti-Russian atmosphere.

The first was the issue of Monsignor Butkevich, a Roman Catholic priest condemned to death at the end of March 1923 for high treason, and the arrest of a number of other priests on similar charges. A British protest note was delivered at Moscow, on March 30, on behalf of Lord Curzon. This provided the excuse for a loud outcry in the reactionary press on “religious persecution in Russia”, the hollowness of which was soon appreciated in progressive circles.

The *Workers' Weekly* commented:²

“The charge of persecution of religion is a proven lie. The priests were tried and found guilty of the political crime of treason. Would the British Government let an English Bishop go free if proven guilty of giving information to the German Government during the war?”

The *Daily Herald*, still a relatively progressive newspaper, pointing out that British Governments in the past *had* executed bishops and even an archbishop, commented that Monsignor Butkevich:³

“had been found guilty of treasonable correspondence with the enemy in wartime.⁴ He was executed for that. To call his execution an attack on religion is nonsensical. The Roman Catholic Church enjoys wider liberty under the Soviets than it ever had under the Tsar and the Holy Synod. But religious liberty does not anywhere include exemption from the law. . . .”

And it pertinently asked:

“Why do they protest now?. . . . There are war plans afoot. The

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, April 14, 1923.

² *Ibid.*, May 12, 1923—in Statement of Executive Committee of C.P.G.B. “War on Workers' Republic”.

³ *Daily Herald*, April 4, 1923.

⁴ Polish Government at the time of the Polish attack on the Soviet Republic.

death of Monsignor Butkevich may be exploited as part of the diplomatic preparation for a possible new attack on the Soviet Republic."

A second pretext, equally hollow, was the issue of the "seizure of British trawlers". Successive Russian Governments—Tsarist before Soviet—had claimed 12-mile territorial waters off their northern coasts, a claim that successive British Governments had refused to recognise. Like Russian Governments before it, the Soviet Government arrested foreign trawlers, including British, found within this 12-mile limit. What was new was that, in the past, British Governments had the habit of delivering polite diplomatic notes of mild remonstrance, whilst now they resorted to strongly worded protests threatening "rupture with the Soviets".

A third pretext was the accusation, based in part on distortions and in part on the equation of Communist statements with statements of the Soviet Government, that Russian diplomats in the East (Afghanistan, Iran, etc.) were "carrying out propaganda hostile to Britain" and "interfering in British affairs". A last pretext was the arrest and execution of a Mr. Davison for acts of espionage and the imprisonment of other agents for similar offences.

In short, for a British Government looking for trouble it was not too difficult to find the necessary excuses.

On May 8, a lengthy British Note was delivered to the Soviet Government in Moscow.¹ In the strongest and most undiplomatic language it demanded:

- (1) The withdrawal of some earlier Russian Notes concerning the arrest of the priests.
- (2) The release of the arrested trawlers and their crews with compensation and an assurance of no further "interference" outside the 3-mile limit.
- (3) That, in connection with the execution of Mr. Davison and the imprisonment of Mrs. Stan Harding, the Soviet Government should admit their "liability" and pay compensation.
- (4) That, in relation to the accusation of anti-British propaganda and activities in the East, the Soviet representatives in Persia, Afghanistan and India should be withdrawn.

It was not only that the tone of the Note was abrupt and offensive,

¹ W. P. and Zelda Coates, *op. cit.*

but it added that unless the Soviet Government *within ten days* undertook “to comply fully and unconditionally with the requirements which it contains”, His Majesty’s Government would “consider themselves immediately free from the obligations” of the Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement.

The character and timing of the British Note with its peremptory demands was such that it was, at once, characterised as an *ultimatum*. The *Daily Chronicle*¹ wrote that

“the ten day limit . . . makes it an ultimatum”.

The *Daily Herald*² commented that

“Such a note would, before 1914, have meant war.”

The ultimatum-character of the Note could be deduced not only from its content, but from the *context* of political events in which it was delivered. Poland, Rumania and other border states were showing every sign of military aggression under Western aegis. Marshal Foch had just inspected the armaments of Poland and Czechoslovakia. Lord Cavan, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, had also been busy “inspecting” the Polish Army. A British Military Mission had just “visited” Rumania and Lord French had “toured” through Bessarabia on the southern Soviet border. The Italian diplomatic representative in Moscow had recommended to his government that simultaneous withdrawal of all foreign diplomatic representatives from the Soviet Union.

Moreover, only two days after the ultimatum had been despatched, Vatslav Vorovsky, an old Bolshevik distinguished for his work on cultural questions, who was attending the Lausanne Conference as Soviet delegate, was assassinated at his hotel, and two of his assistants wounded. The assassin was a Swiss citizen. The Swiss Government had been warned of impending attempts of this nature, but had taken no measures for his safety. When the Conference opened, the morning following the murder, there was not so much as a message of condolence or statement of regret.

On the same day as the murder, the British Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs informed the House of Commons, to shouts of the Opposition benches of “You want war!”, that H.M.S. *Harebell*, a British warship, had been despatched to the Archangel area “to protect British trawlers”.

¹ *Daily Chronicle*, May 10, 1923.

² *Daily Herald*, May 10, 1923.

When last British warships had been despatched to that area, they had indeed "wanted war". It was the period of the war of intervention.

Soviet Conciliation

The attitude of the Soviet Government was firm, but extremely conciliatory. Its reply to Lord Curzon's ultimatum was handed to the British representative in Moscow on May 13.¹ Two days later Leonid Krassin, an old Bolshevik with a European reputation as an engineer, who had been representative in Russia of one of the biggest German engineering firms, arrived in Britain to try to solve by negotiation all outstanding problems between the governments.

The Russian reply stated (i) that they were willing to withdraw the Notes on the trials of the priests; (ii) that in regard to the trawlers, there was an absence of international agreement on the extent of territorial waters, and, therefore, no legal basis for the British demands, but that notwithstanding, the Soviet Government was ready to participate in an international conference on this question and to abide by its decisions; (iii) with respect to Mr Davison and Mrs. Harding, the trials had been carried out before the signature of the Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement, at the time of the British and Polish war of intervention against Russia. Davison was convicted of espionage in connection with the organisation of the British spy, Paul Dukes. During the British occupation of Soviet territory, 26 Russian Commissars had been executed in the Caucasus, and the Soviet Government was quite prepared to discuss compensation on a mutual basis; (iv) the accusation of anti-British activity in the East was based on falsified or distorted extracts from deciphred telegrams, nor had there been an absence of British activity hostile to Soviet interests in these areas, especially on the Central Asian frontiers of Russia.

Finally, the reply concluded that the Soviet Government was ready to settle all points of dispute by "the method of a Conference".

Interesting was the firmness and conciliation of the mass Russian organisations as mirrored in the statements and resolutions of the multitude of huge meetings held in these days. For example, the Moscow Soviet, at a mass meeting attended by the correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, Arthur Ransome,² addressed itself in these terms to Ramsay MacDonald as leader of the British Opposition:³

¹ W. P. and Zelda Coates, op. cit.

² *Manchester Guardian*, May 14, 1923.

³ *International Press Correspondence*, Vol. 3, No. 41, June 7, 1923, p. 387 (translation corrected. J.K.).

“The Moscow Soviet, expressing the unanimous determination of the workers and all citizens of Moscow, appeals through you to the British Labour Party, and begs you to exert every effort to prevent the British Government from taking irrevocable steps.

“The population of our capital, fully preoccupied with the problem of the economic reconstruction of our country, desires peace and normal relations with Britain, and is convinced that the development of trade relations would be in the mutual interests of our two countries. Innumerable meetings held all over the capital since the publication of the British Note, testify to the certainty that a rupture can be avoided if the British Government will understand that the Russian people are not to be addressed in the language of ultimatum, and agree to settle all points of difference on principles of reciprocity and equality.

“The Soviet Republic, disturbed in its peaceful work by Lord Curzon’s ultimatum, and by the murder of its representative, Vorovsky, is anxious to achieve peace and peaceful relations at any price, but is, at the same time, ready to rise to a man in defence of its independence, its sovereignty and its Government.”

British Labour and the Ultimatum

The British labour movement, almost unanimously, condemned the provocations of the Conservative Government. But, as was usual, there was a striking contrast between the mild apologetic criticism voiced by the right-wing official leaders, only too anxious to show that they were just as anti-Soviet as were the Tories, and the vigorous protests of the Communist Party and militants.

Immediately following the Curzon ultimatum, the Joint Council of Labour (representing the T.U.C., Labour Party and Parliamentary Labour Party), issued a statement deploring the British Note,¹ declaring that there was fault on both sides, and calling for arbitration. Thousands of Labour meetings of protest were held on the week-end following, many of them going much further than the mild remonstrations of the official statement.

Ramsay MacDonald and his colleagues saw their role not as leaders of a fight against a Tory war policy, but as “mediators”, and the Tory leaders were able to use the right-wing statements to justify their own line.² Everywhere Conservative press and spokesmen were able to cite

¹ *Daily Herald*, May 12, 1923.

² “Notes of the Month” in the *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 4, No. 6, June 1923.

anti-Soviet Statements of MacDonald, Snowden and Clynes. The Labour Party officially rejected every Communist proposal for united action for peace.

The only consistent campaign against the ultimatum came, as so often, from the Communist Party. Already on May 5, the Executive Committee had wired to every District Committee and to the leading Branches, calling for action against the threatening disruption of Anglo-Soviet relations.¹

On May 12, the Executive Committee of the Party published a statement—*War on the Workers' Republic*²—explaining that, once again, the British Government was “leading the capitalist offensive against the Workers' Government of Russia”. This new capitalist offensive against the working-class state abroad had been prepared by the success of the attack on the working class at home:

“Encouraged by the heavy defeats they have inflicted upon the workers in their own countries, they deem the time is ripe to open a new offensive against the Workers' Republic.”

Analysing the feeble pretexts of Lord Curzon's Note, the Party appealed for action to the British working class:

“Once we stopped war on Russia by a united movement in the Councils of Action. Once again the hour has come to prevent war. . . .”³

The Party proposed that Councils of Action should once again be set up on a national and local scale, that a fight should be made for the unconditional recognition of the Soviet Union, and that approaches should be made to all sections of the British Labour Movement for the convening of an All-in Conference of British working-class organisations to stop the disruption of the Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement and the threat of renewed military intervention.

Mass meetings and rallies were organised without delay all over the country, some under direct Communist Party initiative and some of a more united character. There were big rallies, in the Bull Ring at Birmingham on May 6,⁴ all over London towards the end of the month,⁵ in many parts of South Wales, and in other industrial centres.⁶ To the Party Centre came reports of the establishment of Councils of

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, May 12, 1923.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, May 26, 1923.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Action, including, amongst the first, East Ham and Edmonton, Nottingham, Liverpool, Barrow, Newcastle, Falkirk, Blantyre and Dundee.¹ A further call was made by the Executive Committee on June 2 (*The Party and the War Crisis*).² The campaign was encouraged by a report of a joint meeting of the International Federation of Transport Workers and the All-Russian Union of Transport Workers, Railwaymen and Seamen on May 23–24 in Berlin, where a united appeal was signed (by Edo Fimmen and Robert Williams for the I.F.T.U.) for united action including all necessary measures to stop the transport of munitions that could be used for an interventionary war.

Working-class action was definitely not at the level of the great struggle of August 1920. Three years of anti-Communist propaganda conducted by the right wing, and two years of repeated defeat on the home front, had weakened, without doubt, the militant fighting capacity of the labour movement. But it was *important*, and it was *growing*, virtually from day to day. Certainly the campaign, led by the Communist Party and the militant sections of the trade union movement, was one of the main factors in pushing the official Labour organisations into at least verbal opposition to Lord Curzon's policy, and in bringing to a halt the threatened disruption of the Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement.

On May 15, the issue was debated in the House of Commons.³ Opening for the Opposition, Ramsay MacDonald urged the Government to "get into conference", and warned that:

"... if the Trade Agreement is torn up, there is not the least doubt that a state of incipient war will have been created."

True to type, MacDonald was "at pains to make his dissociation from the Soviet Republic rather more clear than his dissociation from the policy of the British Government."⁴ But the weak opening of MacDonald was balanced by the extremely strong feeling in the House against the Curzon policy. Labour and Liberals were united in opposition, and to their voice was added the representatives of a Conservative section concerned with the loss of a profitable Soviet trade. Meetings all over the country made clear that opposition was growing fast and that the Communist slogans of prevention of war were winning increasing support. More and more Councils of Action were being established. The Government could not afford the repetition of August

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., June 2, 1923.

³ Hansard, May 15, 1923.

⁴ R. Palme Dutt, "Notes of the Month" in the *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 4, No. 6, 1923.

1920, and, already in the debate, its spokesmen began to make a strategic withdrawal.

On May 22, Bonar Law resigned the premiership, and Lord Curzon, to his grief and surprise, whilst remaining at the Foreign Office, was passed over in favour of Stanley Baldwin. The next day, Leonid Krassin, for the Soviet Government, presented to Lord Curzon the new Soviet proposals. The Soviet Government, still conciliatory, agreed to grant British trawlers the right to fish outside the 3-mile limit pending international settlement. It agreed that compensation should be paid in connection with Davison and Mrs. Harding, provided this was not regarded as a precedent. On the issue of "anti-British propaganda" it proposed a more detailed examination. Finally, it suggested that M. Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, should meet British representatives to complete negotiations for a peaceful settlement of all the issues.

Though Lord Curzon still declared that he was dissatisfied, the conciliatory attitude of the Soviet authorities was widely recognised in the press. The campaign was rising, and with it public feelings, and the official Labour Movement was being pressed into action. On May 25, the General Council of the T.U.C. presented a statement to the new Prime Minister welcoming the "conciliatory tone of the Russian reply", and calling on the Government "to act, in further negotiations, in such a manner as will lead to a continuation and extension of the trading agreement, and the complete recognition of the Russian Government". A similar declaration was issued by the Labour Party.¹

On May 30, a fresh British Note, couched in quite different language from the original ultimatum, accepted in the main the Soviet proposals. The last outstanding issues were settled, at least for the moment, by the second week in June.

Three main factors lay behind the complete Tory *volte-face* between the May 8 ultimatum and the Note of May 30.

The first, without doubt, was the conciliatory but firm attitude of the Soviet Government and Soviet people, an attitude that won widespread support amongst British people extending even to certain Conservative circles. The second was the considerable opposition to Curzon's ultimatum-policy in the labour movement and in important progressive circles outside the working-class organisations. But this itself would not have been sufficient had it not been for the third factor—the campaign for *struggle* against the Curzon policy, launched on the

¹ Quoted in W. P. and Zelda Coates, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

initiative of the Communist Party. Had it not been for the Communist Party campaign the broad feeling of opposition would not have been canalised into action strong enough to force the right-wing official leaders of the Labour and trade union movement into an activity which, half-hearted though it was, played a considerable role in forcing the Government to retreat, for the moment, from its aggressive anti-Soviet policy.

The whole episode ended in a clear defeat for Lord Curzon, and certainly was one of the contributory factors to the Tory defeat at the General Election of November 1922.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST IMPERIALISM, 1920–23

Glorification and defence of Empire were an integral part of British reformism, shown at their worst and most blatant in the attitudes of the Fabian Society and in the writings of Blatchford, despite all his great services in awakening the British workers to the vista of socialism.

The I.L.P. courageously, alongside the S.D.F., opposed the Boer War. MacDonald even resigned from the Fabian Society at this time in protest against its Manifesto "Fabianism and Empire". Keir Hardie's book on India was regarded by the authorities as subversive. But the I.L.P.'s attitude to Empire, though at times courageous in practical opposition, was inconsistent and never based on a principled opposition to imperialism.

Within the B.S.P. there was division on this issue. For though Hyndman first came to public attention with his exposures of British rule in India and, at the outset of the Boer War, stood in active opposition to it, he soon abandoned this position. And, later, at the head of a right-wing group within the B.S.P., he took up a more and more openly imperialist position.

There had always been a real internationalist wing within the British radical and labour movement throughout its long history. In the 1880's William Morris and the Socialist League were true internationalists. So were the rank and file of the S.D.F. and later of the B.S.P.

And the most consistent and influential in the S.D.F. and later, the B.S.P.'s fight against imperialism was Theodore Rothstein, who published his *Egypt's Ruin* in 1910, who led the ideological struggle against Hyndman and his group, whose *Socialist Annual* awakened many to the duties of international working-class solidarity, and whose *Essays in*

Socialism and War,¹ under the pen name of John Bryan, explained the imperialist character of World War I. The fight against imperialism was carried out fairly consistently by the S.L.P., particularly by William Paul, whose pamphlet *Labour and Empire* was published towards the end of the war.² But, in general, this fight both in B.S.P. and S.L.P. was confined to generalised educative propaganda and all too little reflected in actions of solidarity with the victims of imperialism, with the workers and people of the subjected countries of the British Empire. One of the great and new contributions of the C.P.G.B. was that, from its first foundation, it not only took up a clear stand against British imperialism, but carried out continuous activity in support of the national liberation movements fighting for national independence and for freedom from the political and economic oppression of British imperialism.

The founders of the British Communist Party understood that the British capitalists were not merely the exploiters of the 45,000,000 in Britain, but of the 450 millions, one-quarter of the world's population, who inhabited the British Empire. They deduced from this that victory over British capitalism could only be achieved as the victory of *all* exploited subjects of British capitalism through the *alliance* of the British working class and its allies at home with the colonial peoples struggling for independence against British imperialism.

The founders of the C.P.G.B. realised their own particular responsibility:

"In relation to the workers in the metropolitan centre, inevitably infected by the influence of imperialism, expressed in reformism and the character of the Labour Party, it has required corresponding tactics, demanding infinite patience and flexibility, especially in relation to the Labour Party and the Labour Party workers, to build up unity of action and develop political awakening. In relation to the colonial peoples it has demanded unswerving solidarity and practical assistance, to build up unity of action, not merely within Britain, but of the British workers and working-class organisations with the national movements of the colonial peoples. . . ."³

This was a new conception for the British working class. Before this

¹ John Bryan, *Essays in Socialism and War*, B.S.P., July 1917, reprinted from *The Call*.

² William Paul, *Labour and Empire*, S.L.P.

³ R. Palme Dutt, *The Communist Party in the Fight Against Imperialism* on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the British Communist Party. World News Pamphlet, 1952, p. 22.

there had existed amongst the advanced workers a deep-seated, but more intuitive than scientific, sympathy with the oppressed colonial people. *But the C.P.G.B. was the first political party in Britain to recognise that the alliance of the British working class with the colonial people was the key to the victory of socialism in Britain.*

Second Congress of C.I. on National and Colonial Question

An extremely educative role on the national and colonial question was played by the Second Congress of the Communist International (July–August 1920). Lenin himself prepared the “Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Question” (June 1920),¹ participated actively in the special Commission, and gave the “Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Question” on July 26, 1920.² The first important statement of the C.P.G.B. E.C. on this question was published as an Introduction to the *Theses on the National and Colonial Question* that were adopted in August 1920 by the Second Congress of the Communist International,³ and published in February 1921, less than six months after the foundation of the Party.

The Executive statement gave a vivid description of the British Empire:

“The British Empire is an area of about fourteen million square miles, with a population of about 445 millions. It thus covers one quarter of the human race. Of this area, ninety-nine per cent has been won by force of conquest or the tricks of diplomacy (the last war for ‘ideals’ added a million square miles of territory). Of this population, 380 million, or 85 per cent, are held under absolute and autocratic dominion without ultimate right or redress. Seven in eight are subject to dictation. So much for the boasted ‘freedom’ of the British Empire.

“Over all this vast area, capitalism holds sway. Whether in the sugar fields of the West Indies, or the jute mills of India, in the rubber plantations of Africa, or the blast furnaces of Middlesbrough, the toiling masses slave away to build up the colonial fortunes of the City and the West End.”⁴

The Executive Statement outlined the aim of imperialism.⁵ What

¹ *Lenin's Selected Works* in 12 vols., vol. 10, pp. 231–238.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 239–249.

³ *National and Colonial Question*—theses adopted by Second Congress of C.I., Moscow August 1920. C.P.G.B., 2d., 16 pp. Introduction on pp. 3–6.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

did the Empire provide? Firstly, an "inexhaustible field of exploitation for surplus capital". Secondly, "an inexhaustible supply of cheap labour". Thirdly, "an inexhaustible supply of potential military force. It is the training-ground of officers and the army and the whole 'Anglo-Indian', 'Dublin Castle' tradition. The methods of the 'Black and Tans' can be practised abroad for use at home." Finally, "the Empire is the very means by which capitalists can delude and cajole the workers at home, not only with the pomp and blazonry of flag-waving and imperial patriotism, but also with the dregs and leavings of the feast. The comparative prosperity of the British working class is built upon a hideous foundation."

It then draws the conclusion:

"There can, therefore, be no truce with the British Empire for the workers . . . they know it stands for a system that is holding them down in common with the workers of half-a-hundred different lands."¹

Finally, the statement put forward the policy for action of the Communist Party.² First, "to expose all the confusions about national equality and liberty which serve only as a cover of imperialism. . . ." Secondly, "to enter into close and active relations with the workers in every subject country, to promote their movement and help to build it up, . . . to stand by them and co-operate with them in their struggle."

Thirdly, to support the broad national liberation movement in the colonial countries irrespective of whether it is Communist in outlook or not. Such movements must be criticised in so far as they develop reactionary tendencies, but

"We must stand by such movements in the actual fight, even while contending vigorously against reactionary tendencies within them and fostering a Communist nucleus distinct from the 'revolutionary democratic movement'. The oppressed masses must learn to feel that the Communist Party of the home country is their friend."

Fourthly, "to initiate and help small Communist groups within the subject countries preparatory for the future struggle, and keep these in close touch with the Communist Party at home".

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE FIGHT FOR UNITY

The Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party

One of the first issues to arise after the Leeds Unity Convention of January, 1921, was that of future relations between the I.L.P. and the Communist International, between the left Marxist groupings within the I.L.P. and the Communist Party of Great Britain.

As a result of its opposition to the war, the I.L.P. had gained considerably in influence and in its membership, which rose from 20,793 in 1914 to 32,984 in 1918, and, with the stormy post-war struggles, to 37,150 in 1920.¹

The feeling amongst the membership of the I.L.P. by the end of the war was strong against any further relations with the Second International. With the foundation of the Third International in March 1919 there was heavy pressure from below to affiliate the I.L.P. to it. The Scottish Conference of the I.L.P. (and Scotland was the area where it was most strongly entrenched in the working-class movement) had voted for such affiliation.

The I.L.P. by 1920 was, to say the least, a mixed body. The I.L.P. leadership was a mixture too, ranging from Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden to Fenner Brockway, R. C. Wallhead and James Maxton. MacDonald, whose theoretical ideas were as near pure right-wing reformism as could be concealed beneath the looseness of his language, yet had emerged from the war with the reputation of a left. In fact in 1922 the Red Clydesiders elected him triumphantly as their leader to replace the right-wing Clynes.

But within the most genuinely left section of the leaders, which contained men like Maxton and Brockway, there was much inconsistency. Courageous stands on the left could be followed by ferocious attacks on the left. At times left-wing phrases were used to attack Communists. And however courageous their attitudes at times, they lacked any consistent theory, *scientific* socialism.

From below the membership were, in the main, militant workers, deeply hating capitalism, desiring socialism, but with their hearts rather than with their reason. Not for the most part familiar with Marxism, their sentimental approach to socialism made them open prey to the demagoguery of the MacDonalds, or when the right wing

¹ Report of N.A.C. I.L.P. to Twenty-ninth Annual Conference of I.L.P., March 28/29, 1921.

were exposed, to the left-wing reformists as second reserve. Despite the militancy of the base, there was in 1920 only a small Marxist group within the I.L.P., loosely assembled with a few other militants in the Left Wing Group, but without a deep influence on the I.L.P. as a whole.

In 1919-1920, with revolution stirring the world, the issue arose, of great importance for the British Labour Movement—which way would the I.L.P. go? Would it take the reformist road as its leaders desired, or the revolutionary road which many of its members *felt* to be just, though they did not as yet fully comprehend it?

The issue arose sharply at the April 1920 Glasgow Conference of the I.L.P. Militant feeling was strong. A big majority voted for withdrawal from the Second International (a card vote showed 26,450 to 7,220).¹ To put a straight question of Second or Third International would indubitably have meant a victory for the Third. So the leadership presented an “alternative”—support for a Swiss Socialist Party proposal for a meeting of all left socialists still outside both Internationals with a high-sounding aim of a vague, single, all-inclusive International. Forgetting that such an amorphous grouping was precisely the nature of the pre-war Second International which they were rejecting, the majority, dazed by a deluge of demagoguery, voted by 472 (representing 23,600) to 206 (representing 10,300) for this diverting proposition.²

The I.L.P. leaders needed time to complete the diversion of the militant feelings of their members. The Glasgow decision gave them the time they needed—time for the revolutionary temper of their rank and file to “simmer down”, time to conduct a thorough-going campaign of denigration against the Third International; time for the truly colossal campaign of British capitalism slandering the Soviet Union to take its toll. The tactics of the I.L.P. leadership were twofold. First, with one hand, protracted negotiations with the Communist International aiming at failure. Second, with the other, to go ahead with preparations for the formation of a new alternative, middle-of-the-road international (that was later aptly to be known as the “Two-and-a-Half” International) composed of centrist bodies like their own, that could be produced as an alternative. They played for time, won it, and used it very skilfully.

The Glasgow Conference was followed, then, by negotiations with

the Communist International.¹ R. C. Wallhead, the I.L.P. Chairman, and Clifford Allen left for Moscow at the end of April 1920, and had two meetings with representatives of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (E.C.C.I.). Wallhead returned to Britain at the end of June, and Allen, who had been ill, some three weeks later.

The I.L.P. delegates presented the E.C.C.I. with a 12-question note raising problems of the Communist International programme, dictatorship of the proletariat, Soviets, attitude to force, affiliation to the Labour Party, etc., to all of which the C.I. gave a full and detailed reply, including sections on the dictatorship of the proletariat, Soviets and parliament, words and deeds in the C.I., attitude to parliament, attitude to Labour Party, and appeal to Communists in the I.L.P. This reply showed a very keen appreciation of the mixed nature and different forces inside the I.L.P., though it considerably over-emphasised the size of the Marxist section,² while stressing quite accurately the opportunism of the leadership. It laid down in detail the conditions of entry to the C.I. that became known as the "Twenty-One Points". In particular it showed the need for a united Communist Party in Britain (it was written before the London Unity Convention of July 31, August 1, 1920) and for Communists in the I.L.P. to become part of it.

Meanwhile the N.A.C. of the I.L.P. came out in support of the German centrists (Independent Social Democratic Party) for a meeting at Berne on December 5, 1920, with other centrist groups including the Swiss Socialist Party, the Austrian Socialist Party and Russian Mensheviks,³ and a further conference at Vienna in February 1921, where the Working Union of Socialist Parties, or "Two-and-a-Half" International, was founded.⁴

Thus, when at the end of March 1921 the decisive Southport, Twenty-ninth Conference of the I.L.P. opened, the delegates were confronted with N.A.C. recommendations which on the one hand

¹ Reply of E.C.C.I. to the questions of the British I.L.P. published as a pamphlet by the C.P.G.B. under the title *C.I. Answers the I.L.P.* in 1932, as a reprint of the 1920 version. The reply was also published by the I.L.P.

² They estimated the Marxist section at 25 per cent of the I.L.P. forces.

³ It is interesting to compare the I.L.P. support for a conference that included the Russian Mensheviks with an admission of R. C. Wallhead on his return from Russia, that "there is no doubt whatever that sections of the S.D.L.P. (Mensheviks) have from time to time actively assisted and co-operated with the counter-revolutionary units of Kolchak and Denikin, and have participated in action war against the Soviet Government." (Source: Report of Councillor R. C. Wallhead on his visit to Russia and meeting with E.C.C.I. in *Report of 29th Annual Conference of I.L.P.*, March 28–29, 1921, pp. 49–57.

⁴ *Report of 29th Annual Conference of the I.L.P.*

twisted and garbled the E.C.C.I. negotiations, attacked the Second Congress of the C.I., and, on the other (having one year previously withdrawn from the Second International because of its betrayal of the working class) now accused the Communists of the Third International of splitting the international working-class movement into socialists and communists. The whole I.L.P. press, joyfully helped by the reactionary press, had prepared the way with continuous attacks on the Communist International and the Soviet Union. Moreover, the delegates were faced with the *fait accompli* of the "Two-and-a-Half" International.

The decisive debate¹ took place around the issues of affiliation to the Third International. J. H. Paling (Bradford) moved a resolution that the conditions for entry into the C.I. were unacceptable. He proclaimed (to confuse the issue) that it was impossible for Britain to follow Russian methods (the C.I. had gone out of its way in its reply to the I.L.P. to point out that the road to socialism would change in different countries according to the specific character of these countries), and called instead for all workers and socialists "to renew their activities as socialist propagandists, to strengthen the I.L.P., to capture the machinery of government, both local and national" . . . to "inaugurate a policy which will transform the broken and bankrupt society of capitalism into socialism". Against this stood the amendment of J. Wilson of Liverpool, a Marxist and member of the Left Wing Group—"That the Twenty-One Points of affiliation to the Third International are acceptable to the I.L.P., and instructs the N.A.C. to act accordingly."

The Left Wing Group spokesmen did their best (J. Wilson, Helen Crawford, C. H. Norman, Charles Barber, S. Saklatvala). Those who declaimed against the dictatorship of the proletariat, said Wilson, had been quite ready to accept the dictatorship of capitalism during the war. Violence was made into a fetish, but it was capitalism, counter-revolution, that had imposed force against the workers in the Russian Revolution.

However, the Conference had already been well prepared in the preceding months by the whole campaign of I.L.P. and reactionary press, and, as the Left Wing explained, the militants and revolutionaries had been deprived of almost every opportunity of putting their case in the months that preceded the conference.

MacDonald himself was brought up to support the resolution. He

¹ Ibid.

was at the peak of his verbose eloquence and sentimental demagoguery, and, beautifully timed, at the high point of his oration he turned to the question of Georgia. Russian Bolsheviks, he cried, had destroyed with tanks the heroic Georgian workers; they “took out and shot on account of his opinions . . . the President of the Social Democratic Party, one of the most quiet, delightful fellows, with a fine mind and heart, as the socialists ought to have.”¹

The resolution was carried by 521 to 97, and after that victory of the right wing it was easy to carry a further vague resolution for “a comprehensive international of the socialist movements of the world”, which, in fact, was interpreted as a *carte blanche* for the “Two-and-a-Half” International. The N.A.C. elections showed R. Wallhead as Chairman, Snowden as Treasurer and Ramsay MacDonald easily topping the poll in the votes for individual members of the N.A.C. With the help of the “verbal left”, the extreme right-wing MacDonald-Snowden group had won their victory. The whole conference was a masterpiece of showmanship and manœuvring, qualities in which they excelled.

After the I.L.P. Conference of March 1921, the Marxists of the Left Wing Group came out of the I.L.P. and joined the Communist Party. There had been about 1,000 left-wingers loosely enrolled as supporters of this group, not all of them Marxists. In fact, several hundred joined the Communist Party, but a number of non-Marxist militants, disgusted with the right-wing conduct, left the I.L.P. and went out into the wilderness, lost for the time to the Labour Movement. The mass of militants who remained inside the I.L.P. were left at the mercy of the right-wing leadership.²

¹ C. H. Norman, one of the I.L.P. Left Wing, who opposed the resolution, wrote in a memorandum on February 15, 1957, concerning the debate: “. . . I feared that there had been some trick resorted to by Ramsay . . . I could not guess what it would be, but trick there was. Just towards the end of his speech, a telegram was handed to him. He paused and looked at it, and then, in that emotional tone only he was capable of, he said that the telegram from Paris conveyed the terrible news that his old friend, the Secretary of the Georgian Socialist Party (description of his many virtues) had been shot by order of the Bolsheviks (sensation). Of course this did the trick. My efforts were vain after this. But I was a little suspicious about the convenience of the happening of this particular event. I had noticed that the telegram had been put on the table by Ramsay MacDonald and left there. I made my way to the platform and looked at the telegram, which in fact had been handed in at some Glasgow Post Office about half an hour or so before . . . the next week the unfortunate murdered Secretary turned up quite well in Paris, and shortly afterwards Ramsay MacDonald was in close collaboration with his ‘deceased’ friend, who was certainly not a spook.” (Copy in Communist Party library.)

² Discussion with Emile Burns, for a period London Secretary of the Left Wing Group of the I.L.P. The report in *Communist* of April 2, 1921, that 5,000 members had passed

The I.L.P. leaders had served reaction well. They had succeeded in diverting an important section of militant workers away from the revolutionary path to a classic centrist position.

The Manifesto of the Left Wing Group, published just before the March 1921 Conference of the I.L.P. explained thus the manoeuvre of the Vienna "Two-and-a-Half" International:

"As long as the I.L.P. can be kept out of the Third International there is hope for its return to the Second International."¹

This is in fact what occurred. The "Two-and-a-Half" International continued to exist for a couple of years, turning its main fire against the Communist International, and then, at the Hamburg Conference of May 1923, returned to the Second International. But it, too, had served its purpose. At a critical period it had diverted important sections of militant workers from the revolutionary path. Like the grand old Duke of York, it "marched them up to the top of the hill, and marched them down again".

The Communist Party and the Labour Party

The Unity Convention had decided by a small majority that the C.P.G.B., once formed, should apply for affiliation to the Labour Party. From a constitutional point of view there should have been no difficulty from the Labour Party side. The Labour Representation Committee (L.R.C.), forerunner of the Labour Party, had, after all, been founded in 1900 to bring together in a single federation *all* sections of the Labour Movement—trade unions, Co-operatives, and all types of socialist organisations. This was the intention of the founders of the Labour Party, and this was, in fact, what happened. Inside the L.R.C., alongside the affiliated trade unions, all three main socialist trends were represented, from the extreme right-wing Fabian Society, through the centrist I.L.P., up to the openly Marxist S.D.F. It is true that the S.D.F. left of its own accord, but from 1916 the B.S.P., again openly Marxist, declaring openly for a revolutionary road to socialism, from 1916 opposing the war, had been affiliated, and no one had suggested its removal. The B.S.P. members formed the majority of the membership

over from the I.L.P. to the Communist Party was hopelessly exaggerated, as also were the denigrating remarks on those that remained within the I.L.P. There were still many good militant workers left within the I.L.P., completely loyal, as far as their understanding allowed them, to the cause of socialism.

¹ *Communist*, March 26, 1921.

of the C.P.G.B., and there was no *formal* reason why its affiliation should be refused.

There was no formal reason, but there *was* a reason, and this was in a way a great compliment to the young Communist Party. The reason was the recognition by the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party and the affiliated trade unions—MacDonald, Henderson, Snowden, Clynes, etc.—that the Communist Party was to be *something different* from the old propagandist socialist societies, that it would be capable of mobilising masses of workers for immediate struggle and for the ideas of socialism, and that, inside the Labour Party, it would be a *major obstacle* to their policy of reformism and class collaboration.

The C.P.G.B. was formed on August 1, 1920. From August 2 it became the major target of hatred, slander, attack of the capitalist class and its propaganda machine, and of the right-wing Labour leaders. It was to the interest of the working class, irrespective of whether they accepted Marxism and the revolutionary road of struggle, to have at the heart of the labour movement experienced militants, ready to fight on every issue of interest to the movement—short term and long term. It was equally of interest to the capitalists, and to those who believed in collaboration with capitalism, that this should, at all costs, be avoided. The fight of the Communist Party for affiliation to the Labour Party was, therefore, to be more than a series of formal applications, but a long-term struggle between the right wing and the militant sections of the labour movement as a whole, lasting over many years.¹

The first Communist application for affiliation was made on August 10, 1920.² It was no diplomatic document. It set out the revolutionary programme of the Communist Party—its belief in the revolutionary path to socialism, in the dictatorship of the proletariat, its rejection of reformism, its conception that Members of Parliament should carry out the policy of the party that sent them to Parliament; and it ended with application for affiliation. It should be understood that whilst the Unity Convention had decided for affiliation by a majority, there were still many members in the C.P.G.B., including in the leadership, especially those who had come from anti-parliamentarian bodies, who were bound by Convention decision to apply for affiliation, but were by no means anxious that this application should meet with success. This tended to influence the character of the Communist Party approach to

¹ For timetable of negotiations between Communist Party and Labour Party, 1920–1923, see Appendix II to this chapter.

² Pamphlet, *The Communist Party and the Labour Party*, C.P.G.B., 1921.

the Labour Party in those first days. This sectarianism was no excuse for the Labour Party rejection, but it made that rejection easier.

The National Executive of the Labour Party considered the application during the following month, and replied (over the signature of Arthur Henderson, Secretary), declining application on the grounds that the objects of the Communist Party did not appear to be in accord with the Constitution, principles and programme of the Labour Party.¹

The Communist Party (Provisional Executive Committee) replied on September 23, asking for further explanation. It had never expected, in applying for affiliation, the Labour Party to accept all the revolutionary principles of the Communist Party, but:

“... it understood the Labour Party to be so catholic in composition and constitution that it could admit to its ranks all sections of the working-class movement that accept the broad principle of independent working-class political action, at the same time granting them freedom to propagate their own particular views as to the policy the Labour Party should pursue and the tactics it should adopt.”²

Such freedom had always been granted previously, including during the period of the war. The Communist Party only asked for the same freedom as that enjoyed by other affiliated organisations.

The Labour Party, replying on October 21,³ quoted a number of attacks made by Communist writers or speakers against the Labour Party and its leaders (not official statements, and made, in fact, by Communists who had in the past opposed C.P. affiliation to the Labour Party), and refused to change its attitude in any way. It now launched the accusation that was to become the favourite line of attack, i.e. that the aim of the C.P. was the disruption of the Labour Party.

To this the Communist Party replied the following month (November 4), following a discussion on the Provisional Executive Committee, insisting that the articles quoted were individual opinions, taken out of context, and asking for the real reasons for the rejection of the Communist Party's request. Individual members of organisations affiliated to the Labour Party had always in the past attacked certain aspects of Labour Party policy:

“In deciding to affiliate we accepted the Constitution of the Labour Party in the belief that the Communist Party would have the com-

¹ *Ibid.* and *Report of 21st Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, Brighton, June 21-24, 1921, p. 20.

² *Ibid.* ³ *Ibid.*

THE COMMUNIST PARTY.

Telephone:

21a, Maiden Lane,
Strand.

WARD 877.

LONDON, W.C. 2. August 5th 1920.

To the Branch Secretaries of the Communist Party.

Comrades,

THE THREATENED WAR AGAINST RUSSIA.

There is no need to remind you of the importance of saving Soviet Russia from the attacks of the capitalist governments. For nearly three years you have worked loyally and well to that end. Your efforts, according to their own admission, have paralysed the militarists' attempts to crush the Russian comrades, for they realise how deeply "Hands off Russia" propaganda has sunk into the minds of the workers.

At this is a supreme moment for action. War - definite, open, bloody war - in support of the Polish nationalists, is threatened against Russia. The Polish attack was secretly suggested and secretly prepared; the Polish request for an armistice was a trick to gain time. Otherwise the Polish delegates to the Tenth Congress would have been instructed to discuss the terms of the armistice. The armistice had been assumed to be the object of the assistance.

Therefore, the government must be told in plain terms that the Communist Party will not have war against Soviet Russia. It is our duty deliberately to advise the workers not only to refuse all

service for that purpose, but to oppose it actively.

The Communist party, in the first days of its existence, must be worthy of its mission. Let us rise to the height of a great occasion.

Call meetings in your district to denounce the new war. Wherever meetings have been arranged for this week-end make them specifically for this object.

Get into touch with the organised workers in your district through the trade union branches, trades councils, shop stewards committees - everywhere - and urge them immediately to notify the government that they will not make nor handle munitions, nor volunteer for service, nor be pressed into service, but will actively oppose, by a general strike, this threatened campaign.

Speak boldly and act quickly. Neglect nothing. On the shoulders of every individual member of the Communist party rests the fate of Russia at this critical moment. Let every member, therefore, be a missionary for the salvation of Russia lest we be branded with the infamy of crushing by our apathy the first Socialist Republic, and our own hopes and ideals at the same time.

Yours fraternally,

ARTHUR MACMANIS, Chairman.

ALBERT INKPIN, Secretary.

London "Hands off Russia" Committee

21a, MAIDEN LANE, STRAND, W.C. 2.

MEETINGS in Grosvenor Square

(Near MARBLE ARCH)

EVERY
WEDNESDAY and SATURDAY
at 8 p.m. precisely.

TO PROTEST
against the
UNPROVOKED ATTACK
by the
POLISH MILITARISTS
on
SOVIET RUSSIA.

Important Speakers on all occasions will address the Meetings. Look for list of Speakers which will appear in the *Daily Herald* on the day of Meeting.

GREAT MASS DEMONSTRATION

Watch for announcement in the *Daily Herald* of a Great Demonstration in Grosvenor Square on Sunday Afternoon, June 20th.

The Committee: Press Room, 14 Essex Street, E.C. 4

A CALL FOR A COMMUNIST PARTY.

to the Communists and Socialists of Great Britain

In face of the strongly entrenched capitalist bureaucracy in this country the most urgent and pressing need in our working class movement to-day is a united and consolidated front.

Social revolution, formerly but an empty phrase, has become a real live force, shaking society at its very roots and challenging the power and authority of capitalism the world over.

In Russia, the working class has rallied nobly to its clarion call and socialism there is seen in action, no longer in the club-room and coffee houses, but in actual struggle, braving torture and death itself in a glorious effort to preserve the results of the first definite and permanent breach in the wall of international imperialism.

True to its class instinct, capitalism is marshalling all its forces, and imperialist nations rush to succour each other in a desperate effort to drench in blood the defenders of the proletarian revolution.

It is thus that the Russian Revolution becomes the touch-stone of international socialism, a veritable beacon light indicating the paths to follow and the course to pursue.

We, in this country, have yet to realise that the great fact of the Russian Revolution has turned the whole current of socialist thought into different channels, giving us new conceptions in place of the old. By such a standard we are revealed as lacking in outlook, policy and tactics. Faced with the vigour and the solidarity of the imperialists internationally, and their organised determination to crush every vestige of working class freedom, and particularly to batter down the Workers' Republic in Russia, who now can defend the time-worn ideas still held by some socialists of a gradual evolution or peaceful transition from capitalism into socialism. Allied to such an illusion is the notion that social revolutions can be quite constitutional affairs and carried through by the most correct parliamentary procedure.

The experience and intensity of the class struggle in recent years has shattered such beliefs.

The parliamentary democracy that idol of the social reformist—has been stripped of its veneration once and for all, and now stands revealed for what it in reality is, an instrument of class oppression to be engineered and wielded in the interests of the bourgeoisie. **Against this sham parliamentary democracy of capitalism the Workers Republic places the method of direct representation and recall as embodied in the Soviet idea: only those performing useful social service being enfranchised.** Even the Marxian slogan that the proletarian revolution must march in the light of its own legality has been amply justified and demonstrated by experience.

(P.T.O.)

The new institutions and order of things just arisen have become a constant challenge and menace to the whole system of international capitalism and indicates the task of the revolutionist. That task is to provide scope and freedom for their development and to assist in their universal realisation. Towards such an objective and to hasten the world revolution accruing, **a Communist Party is wanted.** A party of action. One that will wage the class war up to the point of revolution, rejecting with disdain all compromise and truckle with capitalist reform, but ever seeking to organise and rally the working class to the standard of international communism.

Such a party should be clear in its mission and courageous in its determination. Its fundamental principles must be:—

- a. Communism as against capitalism, i.e., the maintenance of society on a basis of social service rather than class exploitation.
- b. The Soviet idea as against the parliamentary democracy, i.e., a structure making provision for the participation in social administration only of those who render useful service to the community.
- c. Learning from history that dominant classes never yield to the revolutionary enslaved classes without struggle, the communists must be prepared to meet and crush all the efforts of capitalist reactionaries to regain their lost privileges pending a system of thorough going communism. In other words **the Communist Party must stand for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.**

While being aware of the several legitimate claims of the existing parties we think the need for a united political organisation based upon the foregoing principles and fusing all parties which accept the same, cannot be gainsaid.

Unity of action must ever go hand in hand with unity of purpose. Against the predatory forces of capitalism we must hurl the united efforts of all who stand for a complete social change as the only way to end for all time the iniquity of class exploitation.

If you are in agreement with the principles of this Manifesto, you are urged to prepare to attend a great Rank and File Convention, to be held in London on Sunday, August 1st, 1920, and help to lay the foundations of a real revolutionary Communist Party.

Lenin, himself, in reply to a question from a member of the Labour delegation as to his views on the need for the formation of a united Communist Party in Britain, replied: "Genuine partisans of the liberation of the workers from the yoke of capital cannot possibly oppose the foundation of a Communist Party that alone is able to educate the working masses."

That reply indicates the fervent hopes of our Russian comrades.

Let us not disappoint them, but rather be worthy of our responsibilities.

The Provisional Committee for the Communist Party,

THOS. BELL
J. F. HODGSON
ARTHUR MACMANUS (*Chairman*)
WM. PAUL
A. A. WATTS
FRED WILLIS
ALBERT INKPIN (*Secretary*)

21A MAIDEN LANE,
STRAND, LONDON, W.C. 2

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U.F.P. CONFERENCE



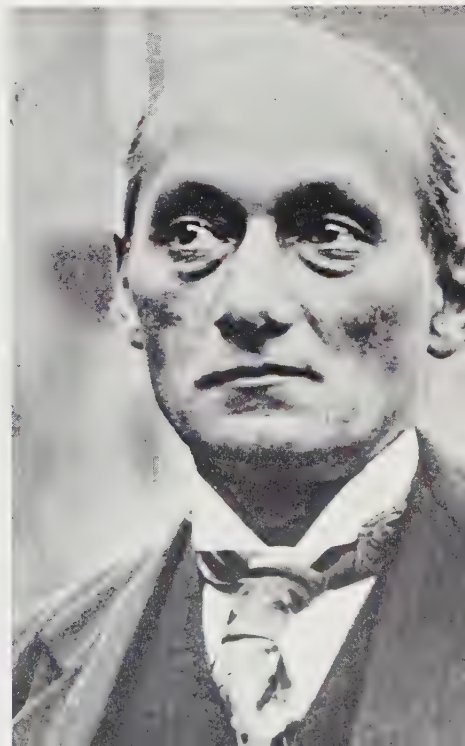
ARTHUR MCMANUS

THOMAS BELL



ALBERT INKPIN

SHAPURJI SAKLATVALA





THE FIRST CENTRAL COMMITTEE

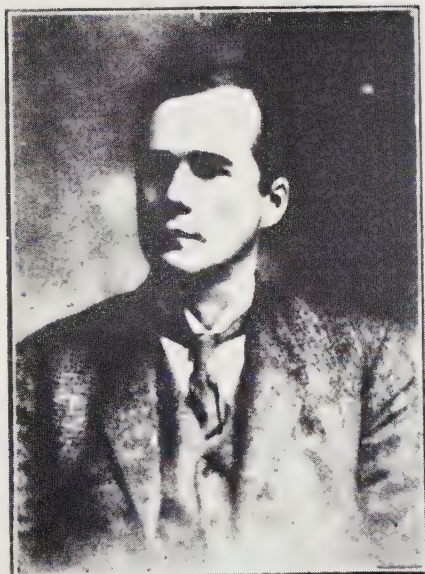


AN EARLY PROPAGANDA VAN

J. T. WALTON NEWBOLD

THE J. T. WALTON NEWBOLD COLLECTION

MOTHERWELL DIVISION.



J. T. Walton Newbold, M.A.,

COMMUNIST CANDIDATE



HARRY POLLITT

To the Working Men and Women of Dundee

COMRADES AND FELLOW-WORKERS,

On November 15th you will be called upon to make a decision that will have far-reaching consequences for you and the future of your class.

In this election you must choose between a representative of capitalism and a representative of the Workers.

Capitalism gave you the war, gave you its horror, its bloodshed and its atrocities. However much the Imperialists may haggle over whose was the blame—over who made the war—never forget that Capitalist Governments were in power in every country involved. On each and all of them responsibility lies.

Capitalism Will Give You More War

Even now nations are preparing! Surely you have had enough; surely the time has come to end it! Unemployment, low wages, semi-starvation, these are the rewards served out to thousands of the Dundee Workers by the system you have so long tolerated. A determined effort is being made to find a Government that will stabilise industry, something the Lloyd George Government signally failed to do. But the very process of stabilising simply means that the industrial defeats inflicted on the Workers during the past two years will be supplemented by political suppression and neglect. **Stabilisation can only be Secured at the Expense of the Workers.**

Parliament is only one of the many institutions that will be used to effect this end. It is a sham, and I do not believe the vital questions affecting the lives of the Working Class can be finally solved there. But a Working Class representative can expose and reveal all the deception and trickery behind which the power of the capitalist class is maintained.

I have fought with you Industrially. I have taken my part in the struggle for Maintenance for the Unemployed; and if it is your will that I should carry on the struggle in Parliament, I will give my whole strength to the task.

If I go, I will go to fight, to do what is humanly possible to break the power of Capitalism, by forcing all class issues to the front, right in their own institutions, thus preparing the way for the revolutionary struggle to power of the Working Class. For this purpose, I shall uncompromisingly forward all the immediate needs of the Workers.

Full Maintenance for the Unemployed

Useful work at Trade Union rates or Full Maintenance I have advocated since the Unemployed crisis first evidenced itself. I still go forward with that as one of the most pressing issues.

WILLIAM GALLACHER'S ELECTION ADDRESS, DUNDEE, 1922



WILLIAM GALLACHER

**PARLIAMENTARY BYE-ELECTION,
AUGUST, 1921.**

CAERPHILLY DIVISION.

COMMUNIST PARTY CANDIDATURE.

**ALL
POWER
TO THE
WORKERS**



**VOTE
FOR
STEWART**

Photo Hays & Van Wadsworth & Son

**"AND MANY A GILDED TOWER,
AND MANY A PALACE STEEP,
SHALL TREMBLE IN THAT HOUR
WHEN LABOUR WAKES FROM SLEEP."**

Wm. Morris,

BOB STEWART

mon right of every other section to advocate its own view as to the policy and tactics the Labour Party should pursue. . . . The agenda for any Labour Party Conference contains resolutions seeking to broaden, modify, or in other ways change the policy and methods of the Labour Party. Are the affiliated bodies responsible for such resolutions charged with ‘disrupting the Labour Party’?”¹

The matter was referred by the Labour Party to their Annual Conference at Brighton in June 1921. During this whole period local Labour Parties from all over the country were coming out in opposition to the position of the leadership, and demanding the acceptance of Communist Party affiliation. In London such demands were particularly strong.² At the London Labour Party Conference at the end of November 1920, Communist affiliation was supported by, amongst others, Alex Gossip of the National Union of Furnishing Trade Operatives and J. J. Vaughan, Mayor of Bethnal Green, and opposed by Herbert Morrison. Affiliation was only defeated by 380 to 283 votes, and that with the aid of a heavy bloc vote of several trade unions. The local Labour Parties of London overwhelmingly supported Communist affiliation.³

The first great public confrontation on the affiliation issue took place at the Twenty-first Annual Conference of the Labour Party, held at Brighton in June, 1921.⁴

A resolution moved by a representative of the Norwood Labour Party, and seconded by Duncan Carmichael of the London Trades Council, called on the Conference:

“in the interest of unity of the earning sections of the community who are opposed to the capitalist system . . . to accept the affiliation of the Communist Party on condition that the Constitution of the Labour Party is accepted and the rules of the Communist Party are in conformity with the same.”

Amongst the supporters of affiliation in the debate were A. J. Cook of the Executive of the Miners’ Federation, Herbert Smith, its Acting President, and Robert Williams of the Transport Workers’ Federation. Those opposing included Emmanuel Shinwell (I.L.P.), two spokesmen

¹ *Ibid.* ² *Communist*, October 7, October 14, October 28, 1920.

³ *Ibid.*, December 2, 1920.

⁴ *Report of 21st Annual Conference of Labour Party*, pp. 138–167.

of the so-called S.D.F.¹ (by that date virtually non-existent, on the extreme right and violently anti-Communist), and as the big gun, Arthur Henderson.

Carmichael stated that he had probably more contact than any other Labour man with the Constituency Labour Parties of London, and that, given Communist affiliation, a united London Labour Party could win great victories. A. J. Cook, officially on behalf of the Miners' Federation, called for Communist affiliation. There should be room, he said, in the Labour Party for a left as well as a right. "If there was no left wing in the movement—God help the movement!" They were facing a capitalist offensive and unity of all forces of the labour movement was essential. Henderson replied with what, already by 1921, had become the main platform of anti-Communist slander—"Moscow domination" and "disruptive aims".

The support of the miners, transport workers and a number of other bodies for Communist affiliation, faced the right-wing leadership with the certainty of a considerable minority vote against their position. So, to avoid a direct vote, the "previous question" was moved and carried on a card vote of 4,115,000 to 224,000, and the clauses of the Executive Report rejecting affiliation were thus accepted.

No sooner was the conference over than the Communist Party returned to the fray, making a renewed request for affiliation to the Labour Party on June 30, 1921,² only to be curtly rejected.³ A further exchange of letters led to a proposal by the Communist Party, and Labour Party acceptance, for a joint discussion between representatives of both parties, which eventually took place at the end of December 1921,⁴ with W. Gallacher, Tom Bell, J. Hodgson, Arthur MacManus and F. H. Peet for the Communist Party, and A. Henderson, M.P., F. W. Jowett, R. J. Davies, George Lansbury and Sydney Webb for the Labour Party.

The Labour Party representatives, led by Henderson, endeavoured to turn the discussion from one of for or against Communist Party affiliation, to one of parliamentary democracy versus "Soviet dictatorship". The Communist representatives were not averse to defending

¹ The original S.D.F. had, of course, long ago merged into the B.S.P. The right-wing group of the B.S.P. leadership around Hyndman, when defeated, had left the B.S.P. and formed themselves into the "National Socialist Party", which they later renamed the "Social-Democratic Federation". This lingered on for a few years as an extreme right-wing organisation and then "withered away".

² *Report of 22nd Annual Conference of Labour Party, Edinburgh, 1922.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

their views on fundamental questions, but the real aim of the right wing was to avoid discussion of the essential issue at stake, i.e. why, in view of the federal character of the Labour Party, should a party with revolutionary views not be permitted to affiliate, when this had been normal in the past, and when Parties of *different* political trends *were* accepted. Would not the affiliation of such a Party strengthen the unity of the working class and its capacity to fight for better conditions and against capitalism? This was what the Communists' representatives asked again and again, but without reply. One concrete result that did emerge was that, subject to their Executive's agreement, the Labour Party should submit a questionnaire to the Communist Party raising a number of questions, and this was accepted by the Communist deputation.¹

At the beginning of 1922 the questionnaire was submitted and in mid-May the Communist reply received.² The Labour Party raised four questions.

The first was whether the political policy of the Communist Party and its affiliation to the Communist International was not incompatible with the objects of the Labour Party—"the political, social and economic emancipation of the people by means of parliamentary democracy". To this the Communist Party replied that the general object of the Labour Party was stated in Clause (d) of Section 3 of the Party Constitution:

"To secure for the producers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof, that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service."

With this general statement of aims the Communist Party was in perfect accord. It was, of course, correct that the Communist Party had its own views on the best methods of achieving that objective. The Communist Party supported the Soviet system, saw the need for revolutionary struggle, and, while it stood for participation in parliamentary activity, it did not believe that such activity alone could lead to the successful achievement of socialism.

"It is a fundamental principle of the Labour Party", was the second question, "to confine its operations to lawful means"; could the Communist Party, in view of its Constitution and Resolutions and affiliation to the Communist International, claim to be consistent with this? To

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid. and *Communist*, June 10, 1922.

this the Communist Party replied that there was nothing in the Labour Party Constitution to say that it would never *under any circumstances* take extra-legal action. Circumstances do not depend on the working class alone:

“The circumstances of any given time must and will determine the form agitation will take.”

The I.L.P. Executive, for instance, at the time of the action of the Leeds Workers' and Soldiers' Councils Conference of 1917, and again in August 1920 in the fight against intervention, had advised a down-tools policy which the Government would certainly have made illegal if it had been put into practice. The Central Hall Conference, held under the auspices of the Council of Action in 1920, authorised the Council “to call for any and every form of withdrawal of labour” to give effect to the anti-intervention struggle. Was this the normal method of parliamentary democracy? Moreover, the I.L.P. was affiliated to the Vienna (“Two-and-a-Half”) International whose constitution, adopted in February 1921, stated (Clause 5):

“... where the capitalist class is strong enough to maintain by violent means its rule against the revolutionary masses of the working people, it will break democracy, keep control of the means of coercion and challenge the working class to an open fight. In this fight it will not be the vote that will decide the battle, but the economic and military strength of the working class. In these circumstances the working class will be able to become the ruling power only by direct action of the masses (mass strikes, rebellion, etc.) and it will have to maintain its power by suppressing the conquered capitalist class.”¹

Was this declaration, the Communist Party asked, used by the Labour Party to expel the I.L.P.? Or was the argument of the Labour Party used only against the Communists?

The third question was, in view of the fact that the Labour Party, by its Constitution, excludes the idea of its M.P.s being under specific pledges as to their action in Parliament, how could this be compatible with the attitude of the Communist Party, whose M.P.s, when elected would be pledged to support Communist policy? The Communist Party replied that, here once again, the Labour Party leadership was trying to single out the Communists *for special treatment*. The Constitu-

¹ Ibid.

tion of the I.L.P. stated that each parliamentary candidate must undertake to run his election in accordance with the principles and policy of that Party and, if elected, to support the Party and all questions coming within the scope of the principles of the I.L.P. It was perfectly true that the Communist Party believed that it should demand of its members that, once elected to Parliament they should remain loyal, and not betray the policy of the Party or the principles on which they had been elected. But why should not the Communist Party have the same rights as the biggest socialist organisation affiliated to the Labour Party—the I.L.P.?

The last question asked whether the Communist Party proposed to become a “loyal constituent of the Labour Party, conforming at all points with its constitution and working for the promotion of its object?” The Communist Party replied that it wanted only the same rights that were given to and constantly exercised by other affiliated organisations including the right to criticise policies and to seek to change them. Given such rights the Communist Party intended to conform with the Constitution of the Labour Party.

The Executive Committee of the Labour Party considered this reply at the end of May 1922, and decided to recommend no change in previous policy.¹ The Communist Party requested that the matter should be reconsidered starting from the large measure of agreement rather than specific disagreement.² Following this preliminary debate, the issue was again referred to the Annual Conference of the Labour Party meeting at Edinburgh on June 27–30, 1922.³

The debate on affiliation at the 1922 Edinburgh Labour Party Conference was opened by Harry Pollitt (delegate of the Boilermakers), moving the reference back of the relevant section of the Executive report. He was supported by delegates from the A.E.U., Dyers and Bleachers’ Union, and local Labour Parties. Against him were arrayed the Holy Trinity of anti-Communism—W. J. Brown (Civil Service Clerical Association), Frank Hodges (Miners’ Federation), and Ramsay MacDonald.

The Communist Party, declared Pollitt, was:

“an integral part of the English working-class movement . . . he suggested that the Labour Party should put to the Communist

¹ *Report of 22nd Annual Conference of Labour Party, Edinburgh, 1922.*

² *Communist*, July 1, 1922.

³ For text of debate see *Report of 22nd Annual Conference of Labour Party*, pp. 196–200.

Party a straight and honest proposition: 'Will you, or will you not abide by the Constitution of the Labour Party'; and let the Communist Party answer it in exactly the same spirit . . . when the Labour Party was in power, they would not depend upon the Fabian Society for the power; they would depend upon the men in the mine, the mill and the shipyard, and that was where the bulk of the Communist Party happened to be. . . ."

The affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party, he concluded, would give an added strength to the Labour Movement, a strength which it so badly needed at the present time.

The supporters of affiliation argued the need for working-class unity against capitalism, for unity against that capitalist offensive which at that very moment was so ruthlessly being waged. Against this, W. J. Brown argued that the Communists were coming into the movement "for the purpose of widening the split and causing further destruction". Frank Hodges proclaimed that the Communists were "the intellectual slaves of Moscow . . . taking orders from the Asiatic mind". Ramsay MacDonald, in a blood-curdling speech, warned that the Communist Party was the hand of Moscow, holding out the right hand of friendship, whilst in the left hand it concealed a dagger "to stick it into your back".

The reference back was lost on a card vote by 3,086,000 to 261,000. The bloc vote was operating and Hodges, for example, cast about a million votes against affiliation, when it was well known that at least one-third to one-half of the miners would have voted the other way.

The Conference also adopted a new rule, moved by Arthur Henderson, that delegates to local Labour Parties or national or local Conferences of the Labour Party should individually accept the Constitution and principles of the Labour Party and that no one should be eligible to be a delegate who belonged to any organisation "having for one of its objects the return to Parliament or to any Local Government Authority of a candidate or candidates other than such as have been approved as running in association with the Labour Party". Under such vague terms was concealed the beginnings of a new right-wing attack on the position of individual Communists and militants in the local Labour Parties, and those elected as delegates to Labour Party Conferences, local or national. The policy of division was to be carried down from national level to local level. To this new rule opposition was strong and the resolution was only carried by 342 to 161. In the

absence of a card vote the substantial measure of opposition to the right wing could more accurately be seen.

The continuous rejection by the Labour Party of repeated requests for Communist affiliation strengthened inside the Communist Party the opinion of some of those who had always been against making the application. A few thought that, now the request had been made and refused, the tactic should be for "no further truck" with the Labour Party.

But the majority in the leadership correctly understood that the adamant insistence by MacDonald, Henderson and others that under no circumstances whatsoever should the Communist Party be accepted, and the triumphant applause of the capitalist press each time the application for affiliation was rejected, was, in fact, the best confirmation of the correctness of the Communist position.

By this time the great capitalist offensive was in full swing. The exclusion of the most militant and revolutionary element from the Labour Party meant in fact condemning the mass of the workers to the leadership of the extreme right and ensuring a further series of retreats when, above all, a counter-offensive was necessary.

The Communist Party decided, therefore, (i) to maintain its position and to continue to fight harder than ever for affiliation; (ii) to develop the strongest possible campaign to defeat the right-wing efforts to extend the ban by prohibiting Communist Party affiliation to local Labour Parties, local Trades and Labour Councils, and by forbidding the election of Communists to Labour Party Conferences, national and local; (iii) without waiting for the acceptance of affiliation to call on the Labour Party for *joint action*, a united front against the capitalist offensive.

A Communist Party manifesto of August 1922, *Who is Splitting the Workers' Movement?*¹ renewed the call for affiliation, called on all its members in local Labour Parties to resist attacks on their representative rights as delegates to working-class organisations, and, "as an expression of the sincerity of its wish to maintain solidarity with the organised movement", announced the extremely important decision for the present to "withdraw all candidates running in opposition to official Labour Party candidates". A statement of the Communist Party Executive of December 9, 1922, while warning against the disastrous right-wing policy of retreat and class collaboration, again maintained its policy of unity and affiliation:

¹ *Communist*, August 12, 1922.

"There can only be one answer. It is not the conduct of the Labour Party leaders, but the needs of the workers in their everyday struggle that decides the policy of the Communist Party, and, as a solid front of the working class is even more necessary now, when the workers are broken by defeat, than it was when the capitalist offensive began, the Communist Party will pursue the course it has followed for the past two years."

Once again, in January of 1923, Tom Bell, as Political Secretary of the Communist Party, sent an *Open Letter to the Executive Committee of the Labour Party*.¹ Under the slogan "March separately—strike jointly", he made a new appeal for united action. In mid-February, 1923, a further *Open Letter to the Labour Party, I.L.P., The General Council, the Trade Unions, and all Socialist Groups*² contained suggestions for a united struggle on wages, hours, unemployment, housing, the cost of living and peace.

At the end of February 1923, the Communist Party made yet one more application for affiliation to the Labour Party.³ It was hoped that, despite the earlier refusals, the matter would be reconsidered in face of the capitalist offensive and a whole number of favourable experiences of common action in different industries and different localities. But the only reply received was that the leadership of the Labour Party considered the position unchanged, and would recommend to its forthcoming National Conference that the rejection should be maintained.⁴

1923 saw the beginning of a turn from full retreat to a partial rally and the beginnings of a working-class counter-offensive in which the Communists, as a party and as individuals in the different unions and local Labour Parties, had played no mean role. The 1923 Labour Party Conference was preceded by a considerable growth of resistance locally, both on the part of the trade unions and of local branches of the Labour Party, to any endeavour to remove from Communists their individual rights of representation. There was still, from below, a not inconsiderable feeling on the affiliation issue, but the feeling was particularly strong against any effort to extend bans to the localities and against individual Communists.

In August 1922, the London Trades Council had debated the Edinburgh amendment extending the ban on Communists to the localities

¹ *Communist*, January 13, 1923.

² *Workers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, March 3, 1923.

⁴ *Report of 23rd Annual Conference of Labour Party*, London, June 26-29, 1923.

and had accepted it only by 56 to 29 votes.¹ The London Labour Party Conference at the end of November 1922, passed a resolution:

“that the workers should present a united front, both political and industrial, to the onslaught of capitalism.”²

Early in 1923 more and more local Labour Parties, Trades Councils and Trades and Labour Councils began to pass resolutions asking for the withdrawal of the Edinburgh amendment, or repudiated it in practice by electing well-known Communists to leading positions or as delegates to local conferences.³

An incomplete list compiled in June 1923, showed that more than 100 branches of trade unions (especially A.E.U., Miners’, N.U.R.), Trades Councils and Trades and Labour Councils had come out in support of Communist affiliation to the Labour Party. Three unions, N.A.F.T.A., N.U.D.A.W. and the Garment Workers’ Union, supported nationally. Amongst the Trades Councils and Trades and Labour Councils supporting were Glasgow, Edinburgh, Barrow, Motherwell, Merthyr Tydfil, Leeds, St. Pancras and Battersea.⁴ Thirteen resolutions were sent to the Labour Party Conference calling, in different forms, for acceptance of Communist affiliation. Thirty-eight members of the Communist Party were elected as delegates to the Labour Party Conference despite all the attempts at prohibition.⁵

The debate at the London (Twenty-third) Labour Party Conference at the end of June opened on an amendment moved by the Barrow Labour Party to the Executive Report.⁶ The amendment demanded “that the application of the Communist Party be accepted”. Amongst those supporting were Harry Pollitt of the Boilermakers, Reg. Bishop of the St. Pancras Labour Party, and S. Saklatvala, M.P. Opposition came from Jack Jones, M.P. (N.U.G.W.) and two hardy annuals of anti-Communism, W. J. Brown and Frank Hodges.

“Russia,” said Hodges, “had nothing to teach the political democracy of the Western world.” Socialists in other countries “looked upon the British Labour movement, first as the most disciplined; second as the nearest to power; and thirdly as the most capable of maintaining power when they got it.” The fact that “there was no Labour movement in

¹ *Communist*, August 19, 1922.

² *Ibid.*, December 2, 1922.

³ *Workers’ Weekly*, March 3, April 14, and July 7, 1923.

⁴ *Workers’ Weekly*, June 30, 1923.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For report of the debate see *Report of 23rd Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, London, June 26–29, 1923, pp. 186–189.

France today", declared W. J. Brown, was due "to the work of Mr. Pollitt's friends".

"The working class movement", answered Pollitt, "was not advancing but was being defeated. . . . Although Russia had nothing to teach Mr. Hodges, yet Russia would be the bulwark of the socialist revolution." The previous year seven members of the Communist Party had been elected to the Labour Party Conference; this year 38. The rank and file of the workers were showing their support for the Communist Party and it was the capitalists, the capitalist press, and the campaign of Hodges and MacDonald that was defeating them.

The debate was cut short by the Chair and showed 2,880,000 against the amendment, and 366,000 in support of it, a considerable rise, and, in view of the bloc vote, of no mean size. The Miners' delegation had voted only by 66 to 50 against Communist affiliation, though of course, the total Miners' vote was recorded against it. The N.U.D.A.W. delegate had a mandate in support of affiliation, but was absent at the moment of the vote.

At the same Conference, under pressure from the rank and file, the right wing made a conspicuous retreat on the issue of exclusion of Communists in the localities and as individuals. Arthur Henderson himself moved the deletion of Clause 9, Section (b) from the Constitution—the famous Edinburgh eligibility clause—supported by J. T. Brownlie of the A.E.U. and J. Bromley of the A.S.L.E.F. Henderson, manœuvring, gave as pretext that "the new rule was somewhat difficult to administer", and that it gave rise to "certain anomalies". Brownlie and Bromley were more outspoken. Their members, Communist Party or not, had the right to be elected, they declared. The Edinburgh Conference had made a mistake, had gone too far, declared Bromley. The motion, put to the Conference, was "carried by an overwhelming majority".

An exchange of letters between Arthur MacManus for the Communist Party and Egerton P. Wake, National Agent for the Labour Party, at the end of the year, confirmed that Communists could be elected as delegates provided that they had been "duly appointed by their Union or Society", that they had "not claimed exemption from the political levy", and that, individually they accepted the Constitution and programme of the Labour Party. The letter also confirmed that such Communists were entitled to individual membership of the Labour Party.¹

¹ Letter from Egerton P. Wake, *Workers' Weekly*, December 21, 1923.

Thus, after three years of persistent struggle for affiliation, the Communist Party was still excluded from the Labour Party, but had won an important victory forcing the right wing to withdraw the Edinburgh amendment. This victory was won, as all battles against reformism have to be won, not by words alone, by debates and discussions alone, but through the experience of the mass of rank and file trade unionists and Labour Party members in the areas of the movement where the Communists, individually and collectively, were seen as the most consistent fighters in the struggle against the capitalist offensive.

From the first day of its formation, the Communist Party was singled out for attack not only by the capitalist press but by the right-wing leaders of the trade unions and Labour Party. From the first day of the formation of the Communist Party, the right-wing reformists, headed by such men as Snowden (I.L.P.), MacDonald (Labour Party and I.L.P.), J. H. Thomas and Hodges (trade unions) made their main line of attack the slander that it was the Communist Party that had split the Labour Movement. What are the significant factors?

- (1) The Communist Party, by its very foundation had united, not split, the revolutionary section of the working class. For the first time the different revolutionary groups were brought into a single whole.
- (2) The Communist Party, from its first foundation, applied for affiliation to the Labour Party.

Whatever the differences in outlook, and they were deep and fundamental, between Communists and reformists, the Communist Party stood for making the Labour Party a single, comprehensive body, where—as was the intention of its founders, as had been laid down on its formation, and as hitherto had been the practice—all sections of the Labour Movement, with freedom of criticism, should be brought together and co-ordinated.

- (3) Even when, time after time, the Communist request for affiliation was rejected, the Communist Party repeatedly offered a united front in action—the carrying out of a common struggle, nationally and locally, against capitalism, against the capitalist offensive, for the improvement of the living standards of the working class and for peace.

It was not the Communist Party which split the working-class movement, but from the beginning the split was made by the right-wing leaders who

rejected again and again Communist affiliation and every form of united struggle.

Significant, too, was the enthusiastic applause of the capitalist class and the capitalist press for the anti-Communism of the right-wing leaders. MacDonald, Snowden, Hodges, at this period, became for the capitalists models of men of principle and honour. Cajoling or coercing, flattering or fulminating, the capitalist press made the anti-Communist cause their cause, and every aspect of the capitalist state and propaganda machine was thrown in to help the right-wing leaders.

Significant, moreover, is the irony of history. Who were the men who led the attack on the Communist Party at three successive Labour Party Conferences, and in between? They it was who led the slander campaign on the Soviet Union as the betrayers of socialism and the Communist Party as disrupters of the working class. But Hodges, the "hero" of Black Friday, became the man who attacked the policy of the Miners' Federation, of which he had been secretary, and who, later, passed openly over to the capitalist side, and ended his days enjoying the contempt of the working class and a large fortune. MacDonald ended as Prime Minister of a Tory (National) Government and acknowledged traitor to the working class. W. J. Brown in May 1958 signed his name along with the Earl of Mexborough, Lord Moynihan, and the Dowager Viscountess Trenchard, as an organiser of the "Anti-Socialist Front" whose "sole object" was "to keep the Socialist Party (meaning the Labour Party) out of office at the next General Election."¹ Those who led the anti-Communist campaign, which aided only capitalism, became, in the end, open spokesmen of anti-socialism, open enemies of the Labour Party, open defenders of the capitalist system.

The right wing wanted, at all costs, to exclude from the Labour Party the most militant sections of the working class who would inevitably have helped to make the Labour Party a real force in the fight against capitalism. To keep the Labour Party for class collaboration, to ensure their own right-wing domination of the Labour Party, they needed above all to isolate the Communists. In this they were, in the main, successful. By their action the capitalist offensive was made more easy. It was the working class that suffered the real loss. Wherever in a given union or in a given locality unity was maintained and the struggle fought, the workers resisted the capitalist offensive with greater energy and greater success.

¹ *The Times*: full page advertisement for anti-Socialist Front, May 14, 1958.

These lessons were already established after the first three years of campaign for Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE ELECTORAL STRUGGLE:
1920–1923

The decision of the London Unity Convention was that the Communist Party should participate in elections both for the local councils and, nationally, for Parliament. This was, as we have seen, a *majority* decision, and did not mean that the whole membership was, as yet, convinced of the importance of such activity. The first meeting of the Provisional Executive Committee, on August 9, 1920, a few days after the Party's foundation, set up a Parliamentary Committee, whose original members were Tom Bell, Fred Willis and C. J. Malone, M.P.,

“to watch Parliamentary affairs, advise Malone in carrying out the Party's work in Parliament, and to work out the Party's attitude towards Parliamentaryism as set forth in the resolution of the National Convention.”¹

The Committee was reorganised early in 1923² as a central department for municipal and parliamentary activity.

Colonel Malone, M.P.

The Party was, in fact, represented in Parliament from its first formation. The representative was Lt.-Col. C. J. Malone, who had been elected to Parliament as a Coalition Liberal in the 1918 coupon Election. In September 1919, as Member for East Leyton, he visited the Soviet Republic, and stirred with what he saw, wrote on his return an enthusiastic account—*The Russian Republic*. He joined the B.S.P., and the Communist Party on its foundation, and attended the Unity Convention.³

In the first months of the Party's existence Col. Malone was very active not only in Parliament, but addressing mass meetings and rallies all over the country. Whatever his theoretical weaknesses, he was a man of passion, moved by the revolutionary tremors that were shaking the world, full of wrath and indignation against the powers that be, and after a fiery speech in the Albert Hall on November 7, 1920, he was

¹ *Communist*, August 12, 1920.

² *Ibid.*, January 6, 1923.

³ See *Labour Who's Who*, 1924 (Labour Publishing Company, p. 112), and Appendix to this chapter.

charged with sedition under Regulation 42 of the Defence of the Realm Act—the infamous D.O.R.A.¹ After a courageous self-defence he was sentenced to six months in the Second Division.² This was in itself a compliment, and as the Party commented at the time:

“... if the Government punishes its enemies, it seldom fails to reward its friends. Paul Dukes, the British agent who arranged and financed the network of espionage for assisting the counter-revolutionary efforts of Denikin and Youdenitch, is rewarded by a knighthood. Malone, for an indignant phrase in a speech . . . gets six months’ imprisonment.”³

Certainly Col. Malone in the first months of his active membership of the Party did his best, with great courage, and often against great opposition, to defend what he saw as Communist ideals; but he had come over to the Party on an emotional rather than a reasoning basis; he was never a Marxist, and had little or no contact with the working-class movement. And, after his release from prison, he began to fall away from Party activity, leaving it before the General Election of 1922.

Caerphilly By-Election, August 1921

The first direct Communist participation in a parliamentary election was in the Caerphilly by-election of August 1921, when Black Friday was still an open wound and unemployment was ravaging the valleys of South Wales.

Caerphilly was part of what, prior to 1918, had been the East Division of Glamorgan, long a stronghold of reaction. Becoming in 1918 a separate constituency, it was won by Alfred Onions, a venerable right-wing official of the South Wales Miners’ Federation. On his death, despite the fact that it was regarded as a miners’ seat, the Labour Party selected as candidate a local school-teacher, Morgan Jones.

In the post-war struggles, the miners had been to the fore. The miners of South Wales had been amongst the first to suffer from Tory policy and from police persecution. In the coalfield area there were strong revolutionary traditions. The Communist Party, therefore,

¹ *Communist*, November 18, 1920.

² See Communist Party pamphlet, *What are a Few Churchills?*, by Col. Malone, published in January 1921, giving text of his defence speech. The origin of the pamphlet’s title was an undiplomatic phrase in his Albert Hall speech which began: “What are a few Churchills strung upon lamp-posts compared to. . . .”

³ *Op cit.*, Introduction, p. 4.

decided to contest Caerphilly to show that there *was* an *alternative policy* to right-wing retreat and betrayal, and “to demonstrate just how far and in what way revolutionary political action differs from the creeping thing the worker has learned to know and hate as Parliamentary.”¹

To the miners the Party made a special appeal:

“Here in this mining area are thousands of workers who know that the present social system means a life of terrible struggle against unemployment, hunger and general insecurity. . . . During the (miners’) lock-out . . . the Communist Party was the *only* political organisation in this country whose members, eighty of them, were thrown into prison for fighting for the miners, their wives and children.”²

One of these, who at that moment was confined in Cardiff jail, only seven miles from the constituency, imprisoned for participation in a miners’ demonstration, was Bob Stewart, already a veteran fighter for socialism, foundation member of the Communist Party. And it was thus appropriate enough that he should be selected by the Party to contest Caerphilly. A letter³ despatched to the Governor of Cardiff Prison requesting the date of Stewart’s release, was not, as might well be expected, affably received, but he did secure his release in time to play a role in the last part of the electoral campaign.

This first Communist parliamentary contest was fought with remarkable vigour for a Party one year old. Two supplements of the weekly *Communist* were used⁴ along with the election address and two or three leaflets. Though the Party hardly existed as an organised branch in the constituency⁵ there was no lack of helpers, canvassers and speakers. Militant miners came streaming in for the campaign from all over the valleys. Nearly all the best known Party speakers came down to the area⁶—Gallacher, Pollitt, Helen Crawford, William Paul, Joe Vaughan, Walton Newbold, Arthur MacManus, T. A. Jackson, as well as non-Party well-wishers like John McLean of the Clydeside. There was quite considerable support from left-wing members of the Labour Party. The whole Labour Party Branch at Bedlinog, for

¹ “Caerphilly—A Call to the Communist Party”, in *Communist*, August 13, 1921.

² “Caerphilly—The Communist Fight”, in *Communist*, August 20, 1921.

³ *Communist*, July 30, 1921.

⁴ *Ibid.*, September 3, 1921.

⁵ Conversation with Bob Stewart, November 1960.

⁶ *Ibid.* and *Communist*, September 3, 1921.

instance, resigned in a body and joined in the campaign for Stewart.¹

Polling Day was fixed for August 24, 1921, and the result showed 2,592 for Bob Stewart, against 13,699 for Morgan Jones, and 8,958 for the Conservative²—sufficient to show that at least a section of the most militant workers, particularly the miners, were beginning to look for a fighting alternative to reformism.

*Background of the 1922 General Election*³

Meanwhile, in the course of 1921, an internal crisis was brewing within the Coalition Government. A growing number of leading Conservatives—not, at first, the most prominent—were challenging the expediency of maintaining the coalition with the Lloyd George Liberals. All sorts of issues of home and foreign policy contributed to their discontent. Some had considered the 1918 suffrage too “broad” and the grants to demobilised soldiers too “generous”; some considered the Montagu Chelmsford reforms in India too “liberal”, or criticised the Treaty which divided Ireland. Some even considered as too “moderate” Lloyd George’s attitude towards the Soviet Republic. There was a growing demand in business circles for measures of “protection” to which Lloyd George’s traditional free trade conceptions were considered an obstacle. His Near Eastern policy, also, as we have seen, came under fire.

Moreover the defeats inflicted on the miners and engineers to an extent made the Tories feel that the most acute working-class danger was at length overcome and with it the need for the “coalitionist” Lloyd George. The feeling that De Valera had been defeated worked on the Tories in the same direction. In India, too, they felt the worst of the danger was over.

In essence, their feeling was that however useful the Lloyd George demagoguery and apparent “concessions” might have been in the period of the war and the immediate difficult post-war days, they were now becoming a nuisance and a hindrance. They wanted a return to the traditional single-party “pure” Tory government. The weak-kneed compliance of the right-wing Labour leaders and the resulting working-class retreat before the employers’ offensive made this seem all the more feasible.

¹ *Communist*, August 20, 1921.

² *Ibid.*, September 3, 1921.

³ See C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars—1918-1940*, Methuen, 1956 reprint, pp. 135-140, and V. G. Trukhanovsky, *Noveishaya Istoriya Anglii*, Moscow, 1959, pp. 90-95.

At first the more prominent Tories like Bonar Law, Lord Curzon and Lord Derby (along with Winston Churchill, still a Liberal), continued to defend the coalition. Some even examined, for a moment, the possibility of a Party fusion. In March 1921, Bonar Law, through ill-health, resigned, and was succeeded by Austin Chamberlain as Lord Privy Seal, leader of the House of Commons, and, later, leader of the Conservative Party. Sir Robert Horne succeeded Chamberlain as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Stanley Baldwin moved into the vacant place at the Board of Trade. The Near Eastern (Chanak) crisis accelerated the division within British ruling circles, though it postponed any immediate change. More and more Conservative M.P.s took up a stand for the ending of the coalition.

On October 19, 1922, at a meeting of Tory M.P.s at the Carlton Club, a majority of 187—ranging from junior ministers to Conservative back benchers—outvoted a minority of 87 on the issue of coalition. The majority included Stanley Baldwin, Amery, and, after much hesitation, Bonar Law: the minority, Chamberlain, Birkenhead and Balfour. Chamberlain and the other pro-coalition ministers resigned. On October 23, Bonar Law became the new leader of the Conservative Party, formed a new Cabinet with Baldwin as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Curzon at the Foreign Office, and obtained the dissolution of Parliament on October 26. A new General Election was fixed for November 15, 1922.

Another facet of the same process was the crisis in the Liberal Party. The split in the Liberal Party developed with the conspiracy of Lloyd George with the Tories against Asquith in 1916 and Lloyd George's subsequent attempt at a post-war coalition opposed to Asquith Liberals.

With the end of the war more and more Liberals turned against the idea of prolonging the war-time coalition with the Tories.

More and more rich and right-wing Liberal supporters turned to the Tories, whilst more and more radical working-class, intellectual and professional sections moved over to the Labour Party.

The time was thus becoming ripe for the Labour Party to replace the Liberal Party in the traditional two-Party structure. Preparing for the General Election, the Conservatives made it quite clear that they intended to withdraw any concessions that had been prised out of them by the working class in the period of the war or immediate post-war months, whilst maintaining all the gains that the employers had made in the ensuing period of working-class retreat. This was the meaning of

such Tory slogans as "Stabilisation", "Tranquillity" and "Back to pre-war". The Labour Party leadership, far from seizing this most favourable opportunity for putting forward a real socialist alternative to Tory reaction or Liberalism in decline, publicly echoed in their electoral propaganda the Liberal emptiness. Right-wing domination of the Labour Party had been strengthened since the 1918 election, and anti-Communism became part of its platform.

The Labour Party, therefore, put forward a programme—*International Peace and National Liberation*—which supported imperial policy in India and Ireland, accepted reparations apart from a mild call for mild reductions, and opposed the withdrawal of British troops from Germany. On the home front, it set out to save capitalism from its own misdeeds. Even the demand for a capital levy was half-hearted and quite blatantly rejected by some of the more prominent Labour candidates like, for instance, William Graham and Ben Tillett.¹ Such a policy was not easy to distinguish from that of the Tories, and quite indistinguishable from that of the Liberals. "On all questions", wrote the *New Statesman*,²

"of foreign policy and on nearly all questions of domestic policy, there is no serious division of opinion between the Liberals and the Labour Party."

Or, as Mr. Lloyd George expressed it:³

"Whoever wins, there should be no detriment to the national interest from revolutionary measures on the one hand or reactionary measures on the other."

Despite their confidence in the intentions of the right-wing Labour leaders, the British capitalists *did*, in fact, as is clear enough from their press of the moment, *fear* a substantial Labour advance in the elections. Why, in the absence of any official Labour policy that threatened capitalism, should this have been so?

The answer lay in the strong anti-Tory feeling that was spreading amongst the working class, in the militant attitudes of increasing numbers of the rank and file of the Labour Party and trade union movement. The answer lay not in the leadership but in the political pressure of the membership and supporters *upon* the leadership:

¹ "Review of the Month" in *Communist Review*, Vol. 3, No. 8, December 1922.

² *New Statesman*, October 23, 1922.

³ Lloyd George, *Electoral Address to the National Liberal Party*, October 25, 1922.

“The answer to that question is the answer why we (Communists) should support the Labour Party candidates, even though they are tied to a programme of this character. The capitalists are afraid of the Labour Party, not because of what it stands for now, but because of what will come after.”¹

The Communist Electoral Campaign of 1922

It was in March 1922 that the Communist Party first announced its intention of contesting the forthcoming General Election,² putting forward a provisional list of candidates, some of whom might stand, with official support, as Labour candidates—others as direct candidates of the Communist Party.³ The Executive Committee, it declared:

“is determined that the Communists shall enter into the lists at the forthcoming General Election.”

Plans were outlined for a “General Election Fighting Fund” to be organised from the columns of the *Communist*. The Communist electoral programme and a general statement of electoral tactics were contained in the manifesto: “A United Front Against the Capitalist Enemy”—issued at the end of October.⁴

The essence of the approach was the need for working-class unity against the capitalist offensive:

“To demonstrate our strength and unity we must stand together. We must present a united front of the working class. No worker must stand against a worker to the advantage of the capitalists.”

The crying need for united action determined the Communist approach to the elections. It was agreed that a number of candidates should stand directly in the name of the Party, whilst others might stand as Labour candidates with official Labour support, but that in no case would the Party, in the elections, put up candidates *against* candidates of the Labour Party. Electors were asked to vote Labour where there was no Communist standing, whilst they were warned against illusions about the immediate result of Labour Party successes:

“The large body of the working-class forces in the Labour Party stands for the fight against capitalism, even though they do not clearly understand the implications of the struggle. . . . But, inasmuch

¹ R. Palme Dutt, “The Labour Party Programme”, in *Communist*, November 4, 1922.

² *Communist*, March 4, 1922.

³ *Ibid.*, March 4, 1922.

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 28, 1922.

as they stand for the fight against capitalism, we are with them in action, even while we point out their mistakes.

"Because we are convinced that, by the struggle against capitalism, they will be compelled to adopt the policy of the Communist Party sooner or later, or perish, we decline to put opposition candidates against the Labour Party candidates, where they are already fighting. . . . We call on the revolutionary workers to give the most active support to every Labour candidate whatever our criticisms among ourselves; in all action against the capitalists, we present a common front.

"But support the Labour Party candidates with your eyes open."

Militant workers, explained the manifesto, must, both during and after the elections, press the Labour candidates and M.P.s into the fight against capitalism—to support, for instance, the demands of the unemployed, to defend the freedom of organisation and association of working-class organisations, to fight against the military expenditure and the war policy of the Tories.

A very great weakness, however, in the Election Manifesto of the Party was the lack of any simple, clear-cut immediate programme based on the demands of the working class and its allies. The electoral *tactics* were explained, something of the revolutionary long-term perspective was examined; but no Party policy on immediate burning issues of home and foreign policy.

In the course of October 1922, the Communist candidates were finally selected, and the Party launched its first general election campaign. In the end, six Communists were put forward as candidates.¹ Two—J. T. Walton Newbold at Motherwell, and William Gallacher at Dundee—stood directly as Communist Party candidates; a further two—Alec Geddes at Greenock and Walter Windsor at N.E. Bethnal Green—stood with local but not official Labour Party support; two—Shapurji Saklatvala at N. Battersea and J. J. Vaughan at S.W. Bethnal Green—stood as official Labour Party candidates. Finally, Morgan Philips Price, then a close sympathiser of the Communist Party though not a card holder, stood as official Labour candidate for Gloucester City.

Even where the Communist candidates did not receive *official* Labour Party backing, they *did* receive open public support from important sections of the labour movement. The candidature of

¹ *Ibid.*, November 25, 1922.

Walton Newbold at Motherwell, for instance, was endorsed by the local Trades and Labour Council, whilst Labour M.P.s and other leaders supported him from his platform.¹ Alec Geddes, who was nominated by the Greenock Unemployed Committee, was endorsed by the District Committee of the A.E.U. and the Greenock Trades and Labour Council.² A number of leading Labour Party members openly supported Gallacher's candidature at Dundee, including James Maxton, I.L.P. M.P. for Bridgeton (Glasgow), John Wheatley, M.P. for Shettleston, and A. J. Cook, Miners' Agent in the Rhondda.³

In the Communist constituencies there were many rousing and enthusiastic meetings, for which the *Communist Daily* as it was called in London (edited in London by R. Palme Dutt) and the *Daily Communist*, in Scotland (edited by Harry Pollitt from Glasgow) played an important rallying role, and were sold out almost as soon as they appeared.⁴ The last issue of the London edition contained these prophetic words:

"We must not let this experience be lost . . . let us hold this aim before us. A real workers' daily is a possible thing. We must not rest till we have made it ours."⁵

The whole international communist movement followed with interest the first participation of the British Communists in a general election campaign. British delegates to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International at Moscow reported that Lenin had told them in an interview⁶ that:

"everything should be done . . . to bring our Communist point of view before the largest possible masses of the workers by means of simple slogans and door to door canvassing. He is anxious that the Party should enter into the election with practical and simple slogans and not make the mistake of stressing theoretical questions."

On the eve of the election, a manifesto signed jointly by the Executive Committees of the Communist International and of the C.P.G.B.,

¹ *Ibid.*, November 11, 1922.

² *Communist Daily*, London Edition, No. 1, November 13, 1922.

³ W. Gallacher's November 1922 *Election Address*, and other election leaflets.

⁴ London Edition, November 13, 14 and 15, 1922. Glasgow Edition, November 11, 12, 13 and 14, 1922.

⁵ *Communist Daily*, London Edition, No. 3, November 15, 1922.

⁶ *Ibid.*, London Edition, No. 1, November 13, 1922.

was published in the *Communist Daily*.¹ It pointed to the betrayal of all the golden promises of the Khaki Election. Instead of "Homes fit for Heroes" there had been a major offensive against living conditions. Instead of the oft-pledged "peace, disarmament and freedom" there had been the war of intervention against the Russian Republic, oppression throughout the Empire.

The whole international working-class movement, declared the Manifesto, had its eyes on the struggle of the workers in Britain, centre of world imperialism. They had watched with pride the great post-war strikes of 1919-1920 and the bold struggle against intervention, but, with sadness, they had seen the role of the right-wing Labour leaders inside and outside Parliament splitting the working-class movement and disrupting resistance to the employers' offensive. Warning strongly that if official Labour continued, in opposition or office, to preach conciliation and retreat it would inevitably betray the interests of the workers, the Manifesto none the less called for support for Labour candidates alongside the candidates of the Communist Party.

The Election Result

The result of the election was a victory for the Conservative Party, which, with 347 seats on a vote of nearly 5½ millions, obtained a majority of 88 over all other Parties. The Liberals, their weakness accentuated by their division at the poll into two separate sections, won 117 seats (Asquith Liberals, 60; Lloyd George National Liberals, 57) on a vote of 4.1 million. Despite all the feebleness and hesitation of the Labour approaches, the most significant result of the election was the Labour Party's winning of 142 seats (compared with 59 in December 1918) on a vote of 4.2 million (compared to 2.3 million in 1918), thus establishing itself as His Majesty's Official Opposition in the House of Commons. Very significant, too, was the fact that, of the six Communists standing, two won seats—one as a direct Communist, and one as an official Labour candidate.²

The Communist result, for the first electoral contest of a young Party, was promising. Of the two Communists standing directly as Party candidates, J. Walton Newbold won Motherwell on a minority vote with 8,262 votes, increasing his vote from 4,135 in 1918 when he had stood as the official Labour candidate. William Gallacher at

¹ Ibid., London Edition, No. 2, November 14, 1922, and Glasgow Edition, No. 2, November 12, 1922.

² For details of the Communist vote see *Communist*, November 25, 1922, and Appendix III to this chapter.

Dundee, though bottom of the poll, had a not insignificant vote of 5,906 in a two seat constituency which was won by a freak candidate, the Prohibitionist Scrymgeour, and the popular Labour candidate, E. D. Morel, and where, also amongst the defeated, was Winston Churchill standing as a National Liberal.

Of the two Communists with local but not official Labour support, Alec Geddes at Greenock, polled 9,776 votes, only 744 behind the victorious Independent Liberal, and W. Windsor, at N.E. Bethnal Green, polled 5,659, only 115 votes behind the Liberal, who topped the poll.

Of the two Communists who stood as official Labour Party candidates, S. Saklatvala won North Battersea with 11,311 votes, over 2,000 ahead of the next candidate, a National Liberal, whilst J. J. Vaughan, in S.W. Bethnal Green, polled 4,034 votes, just over 1,000 behind the victorious Liberal. It is interesting, in this connection, to note that an S.D.F. candidate, standing here in 1913, had polled 135 votes.

Finally, M. Philips Price, standing as official Labour candidate, but well-known as a Communist sympathiser, polled 7,871 votes at Gloucester City, only 51 behind the Conservative who gained the seat.

Thus of the seven Communists and near-Communists standing, two won their seats and four took second place, failing to win by only 1,018, 744, 115 and 51 respectively—a not unimpressive result.

The result of the 1922 election was in more than one way significant.¹ For the first time for almost twenty years, a “pure” Conservative Government enjoyed an absolute majority, and now, untrammelled by temporising or more cautious allies, was rearing to go into a new offensive against the working class.

But, against this, for the first time, the Labour Party had become the second largest party in the House. Despite the milk-and-water of the Labour electoral programme, more and more workers expressed their hostility to Toryism in a vote for Labour.

What, perhaps, was most of all significant, was the marked contrast, within the Labour vote, between the support for the left- and the lack of support for the right-wing candidates. In general the militants with a class approach increased, whilst the more notorious right-wingers decreased their polls. A good example was Glasgow. The *Daily Herald*² had thus described the Glasgow Labour candidates:

¹ See R. Palme Dutt’s “Notes of the Month”, in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 3, No. 6, December 1922, pp. 323–328.

² *Daily Herald*, quoted in article “Go Left you go Right”, in *Communist*, November 25, 1922, pp. 4–5.

"All Glasgow's Labour victors were advocates of peace by negotiation during the war and opponents of indemnities. The main issue in Glasgow after the war was the capital levy, war indemnities, rent issues, unemployment, housing reform and no more war."

And, here in Glasgow, where the Labour candidates were amongst the most progressive, two seats were held and eight new seats won. Conversely, in Salford, Ben Tillett, the great "war recruiter" who supported reparations "according to Germany's capacity to pay", scraped in by a majority of 19, compared to his majority of 1,924 in 1918. J. R. Clynes, who, like Tillett, equivocated on the capital levy issue, and who was unopposed in 1918, received in Plating, Manchester, a majority of only 869. John Hodges' majority fell from 8,042 to 2,001. Arthur Henderson was defeated.

Pointing to the lessons in a post-election statement—"The Communist Party and the Election"¹—the Party rejoiced in the success of its own candidates and the growth of support for the Labour Party, but warned that the Labour Party:

"must prove its ability to press forward the demands of the working class against all the forces of reaction.

"There can be no rest or peace until the power of the capitalists has been broken and we have a Workers' Government."

Communists in the House

A further Communist Party statement² greeted the new Communist M.P.s—Newbold and Saklatvala—and explained their relationship with the Parliamentary Labour Party, and that of Newbold, a direct Communist representative, to the Communist Party.

Our M.P.s, it stated:

"will co-operate with the Labour Party in every struggle against the capitalist Parties and will not hesitate, when the Labour Party fails to carry through the struggle, to stand and fight alone for the interests of the working class."

Saklatvala, as an official Labour M.P. of course, accepted the Labour Whip; Newbold applied for it, but was rejected.³ Both M.P.s attended regularly the meetings of the Party's Political Bureau and Executive Committee.⁴ Here was an important point of principle. The right-

¹ Minutes of Organisation Bureau of January-December 1922.

² "The Communist M.P.s", in *Communist*, November 25, 1922.

³ Minutes of Executive Committee, November 20, 1922.

⁴ *Communist*, November 25, 1922.

wing Labour leaders always resisted the idea that their M.P.s should be subordinated to the decisions of the Labour Party Conference. The Parliamentary Party was to be a law unto itself. At the 1920 Annual Conference, for instance, J. R. Clynes, then leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party, bluntly told the conference that "the Executive Committee has no authority over the Parliamentary Party". The Communist Party, by way of contrast, had decided its policy at its initial Unity Convention by a resolution moved by Tom Bell on "Party control of the activities and representatives of the Party elected to Parliament or local bodies". This, of course, could not apply to the same degree to Communists elected as Labour Party representatives, but it did mean that the direct Communist Party M.P.s were formally bound by the decisions of Party Congress and accepted the same Party discipline as all other members.

In the hostile atmosphere of the House, Saklatvala and Newbold valiantly strove to put forward a militant working-class policy on all the issues of the day.¹ Newbold stoutly defended the demands of the unemployed and campaigned for cheaper houses and lower rents. Alone, at the end of March 1923, he spoke and voted against the Army and Navy Estimates. He was suspended from the House at the end of May 1923, for attempting to intervene against the Speaker's will on the Curzon ultimatum. Both Newbold and Saklatvala plunged into the debates just as often as they were able to catch the Speaker's evasive eye, in particular to raise an almost lone voice against British imperialist policy in the colonies, denouncing the oppression in India, the Irish Treaty of 1922, repression in Mesopotamia and British occupation of Germany. In February 1923, Newbold made a prophetic speech on the acceptance of a United States loan of £38 million, warning that:

"When the Labour Government comes into office and is face to face, as it will be, with an attempted boycott of international capitalism, they will discover that whilst they can deal, perhaps, with their own capitalists, they will not be able to deal with the American capitalist government, and that this funding of the debt, which appears immediately to redound to the interest of the unemployed, is a scheme intended ultimately for the enslavement of the Labour Party."

¹ *Communist*, December 2, Saklatvala on India and Ireland, Newbold (maiden speech) on Rents and Unemployed; December 9, 1922, Saklatvala on Ireland, *Workers' Weekly*, February 24, 1923, Newbold on Ruhr and United States; March 24, 1923, Newbold on Army and Navy Estimates; May 26, 1923 and June 9, 1923, Newbold's suspension; July 28, 1923, Newbold's intervention in debate on socialism, etc.

A number of the most important speeches of both Newbold and Saklatvala (as of Malone before them) were published as pamphlets.¹

Communist Party in the Local Elections

The first entry of the Party into the field of local elections was in October 1921, some three months after its foundation, in preparation for the November round of municipal elections. A programme was issued—*The Municipal Elections—Manifesto of the C.P.G.B.*—at the end of October 1921,² putting forward a number of proposals connected with local conditions and services. It demanded the fullest local measures for the “relief of distress” using all available powers of the local councils but, in the last analysis, not heeding “legal limitations”, on the example of Poplar and Bethnal Green. It put to the fore local action for work or full maintenance at trade union rates for the unemployed. It proposed increased local power over the police, the rationing of housing space pending the provision of new houses, the rating of factory property.

Only the most incomplete facts have thus far been available on the results of Communist participation in local government affairs in these early years.³ Incomplete information shows that there were some contests in every Division of the Party in November 1921,⁴ that in 20 towns 29 wards were contested, above all in Scotland, where 14 wards were contested in 11 towns, and that in these 29 contests 20,289 votes were won, with two Communist gains in Lancashire and one in Yorkshire.

In March 1922 Communist Party members contested a number of seats in the Middlesex and the London County Council elections on a programme almost identical with that of the previous November. Three Party members stood in Middlesex (J. Holt, A. H. Hawkins and Albert Inkipin) and six for the L.C.C. (A. A. Watts and J. Butler for N. Battersea; Mrs. Ganley for S. Battersea, J. J. Vaughan and J. Valentine for Bethnal Green and Albert Inkipin for S.W. St. Pancras).⁵

¹ Publications of Communist M.P.s, 1920-1923, include:

October 1920—Col. Malone, *The Humbug Parliament*.

March 1921—Col. Malone, *What are a Few Churchills?*

November 1921—J. Walton Newbold, *The Doom of a Coalfield*.

August-September 1923—J. Walton Newbold, *Speeches* in three separate pamphlets: *Unemployment, Against the Warmongers, Snowden's Socialism Riddled*.

² *Communist*, October 22, 1921.

³ Any information on this subject would be gratefully received.

⁴ *Communist*, December 24, 1921.

⁵ *Ibid.*, February 25, 1922.

Butler and Watts held their seats at Battersea, Inkpin failed at St. Pancras but polled about 2,000 votes, and both Vaughan and Valentine, also unsuccessful, polled over 2,000.¹

A fresh electoral programme—"Local Government Elections—Policy of the Communist Party"²—was prepared for the local elections of November 1922, which immediately preceded the General Election. This contained much more detailed proposals for local affairs and marked a step forward in Communist activity in this field.³ In London, for instance, five out of seven Communists standing were elected in Bethnal Green.

Thus, in the period 1920–1923 the Communist Party, both locally and nationally, made its first entry into the field of electoral action. It is clear that there were many weaknesses in this activity. Though the Unity Convention had, by a substantial majority, decided that the Party should, in a new revolutionary way, participate in Parliament and Local Councils, it could not as yet be said that all members of the Party were convinced of the importance of such work. And of those who, on the surface, *were* convinced, *some* still saw such participation as a purely *negative* act, i.e. they saw only a potential platform from which reaction could be exposed and general Marxist principles enunciated, but not at all clearly the positive way in which struggle on immediate issues in Council or Parliament could aid and complement the mass struggle outside. Nor did they see how the *combined* struggle, inside and outside, *could* win concrete gains for the working class even within the framework of capitalism, just as the wage struggle could defend and even improve the living standards of the working class even within capitalism.

It was, of course, quite correct decisively to reject the classic reformist view that socialism could be achieved through nothing more than successive reforms introduced by local Council and Parliament, but this did *not* mean that it was correct for Marxists to refrain from struggling in a *revolutionary way* for progressive reforms. The reformists saw socialism achieved by reforms alone through the channel of Council and Parliament. For the Marxists, the struggle for reforms, inside and outside Parliament and Council, was necessary both for the immediate defence of the lot of the working class and its allies, and as a necessary stage in the long-term revolutionary struggle for political power.

¹ *Ibid.*, March 11, 1922.

² *Ibid.*, October 21, 1922.

³ *Communist Daily*, London Edition, No. 2, November 14, 1922.

Many Communists were beginning to understand the correct tactics, but not yet all. The early election programmes reflect these early confusions. They were far too abstract and theoretical, too little concerned with immediate burning issues of home and foreign affairs. They were too "internal", addressed to the converted and not yet to the mass of workers entering the struggle. Lenin's advice to the British delegates to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, to use "simple slogans", was not yet fully understood.

The first months, particularly in the General Election of 1922, were very promising. They showed that a growing number of workers were rejecting the policy of the reformist leaders and looking for a militant socialist alternative. They showed, too, the importance of the absence as yet of a full application by the Labour leaders of a policy of bans and proscriptions aimed at Communists and militants.

The Communist Party demonstrated that it stood for working-class unity, for united action, for the extension of unity against capitalism into the electoral field. The splitting tactics, on this issue also, came from the right wing.

ORGANISATION AND RE-ORGANISATION

First Step

At the foundation Congress of the Communist Party at the end of July 1920, the question of organisation was hardly touched upon. A *new* party was founded on revolutionary principles, but it inherited an *old* type of party organisation. There were as yet neither Constitution nor Rules. And therefore the Party, as it then came into existence, was a series of loosely organised sections of former loosely organised socialist groups with a Provisional Executive Committee itself constituted on a more or less "representational" or "geographical" basis. Naturally enough the first task of all was to merge the various groups and committees into some uniform type of united national, district and local organisation, to adopt, at least provisionally, an agreed Constitution and Rules (1920-1921) and then (1922-1923) to consider more deeply, in the light of experience, home and international, the new type of organisation that was needed by a revolutionary Party.

The first step therefore was the formation of single Communist branches out of the various separate groupings, some form of district organisation, and some form of working leadership. This was the work of the first month of the Party following the London Unity Conven-

tion, though to some extent it had to be repeated in the early months of 1921 to absorb into the united organisation the new forces brought to the Party by the Leeds Congress at the end of January.

The first meeting of the Provisional Executive Committee (August 9, 1920) appointed an "Organisation Committee" consisting of Tom Bell, J. F. Hodgson, W. Mellor and A. A. Watts "to attend to the internal organisation of the Party", and set up a Sub-Executive (of six members) "to attend to all Executive business between the meetings of the full Executive".¹

In the first few weeks contact was established with 145 Branches (London 34, rest of England 69, Scotland 27, and Wales 15) and the process of amalgamating, registering and extending the Branches continued. The first organisers of the Party were to find that there was a very great gap between the official figures of Branch and national membership of the old socialist groups and what they found in practice when it came to establishing and registering the new Communist Party Branches. Tom Bell wrote:

"We took stock of our resources and membership. Our first census, after the Second Unity Conference [Leeds], revealed no more than 2,000 to 2,500 members. I found that many names given to us as Branches only existed on paper. Even when the Scottish Communist Labour Party came in, though they talked of 4,000 members, I doubt if they brought 200 into the Party.² It was the same when the "Left wing" of the I.L.P. came over. They talked of tens of thousands; in point of fact, they too, only added one or two hundreds. But it was difficult to reach final conclusions: each section protested, insisting on its membership as given. That is why the figure of 10,000 got into the record of the C.I. as the membership of the C.P.G.B. in 1921."³

It is hard to get accurate figures on the early membership of the Party. It can be calculated roughly that the delegates to the original foundation Congress of the Party represented on paper somewhere between 4,000–5,000 members, but this means accepting memberships that were often in part on paper. It would seem that membership after

¹ *Communist*, August 12, 1920.

² J. R. Campbell notes: "I should say that 400 would be more correct for the Communist Labour Party. They certainly contributed many of the best cadres to the Party in Scotland."

³ *Pioneering Days*, Tom Bell, Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 194–195.

the Second Unity Congress [Leeds] was probably more in the nature of 3,000 and that the 2,000 figure of which Tom Bell writes belongs to the period of 1922 when the first real census of Party membership was taken. Certainly Tom Bell was completely correct in contrasting real and paper membership.

The old socialist groups were above all propagandist bodies, and membership of one of their branches was often a loose token of general political support. It did not necessarily carry with it an obligation to activity in the locality or still less to pay the official Party dues.

From August onwards the work began of establishing leadership in the areas, setting up what were known as Provisional Councils and, so far as finance permitted, the appointment of full-time Divisional Organisers.

Divisional Councils were set up in London and in Lancashire (and Cheshire) in September 1920;¹ in Wales in October;² and, step by step, in Scotland, north-east England and Yorkshire. The move of Party headquarters from its first provisional home in the old B.S.P. office in Maiden Lane to 16, King Street took place on December 28, 1920.³

First Constitution and Rules

The main task of the Third Congress of the Communist Party (Manchester, April 23-24, 1921), was to adopt a Constitution and Rules, a draft of which had been circulated to all Branches for discussion and amendment.⁴ In fact there was considerable debate in the Branches where many members still thought in terms of the old socialist groups, and some 260 amendments were moved for discussion at the Congress. The main points at issue were the methods of appointing Divisional Organisers (Central or District appointment), the question of mandating delegates to Congress, the issue as to whether the General Secretary should be elected at Congress or by the Executive Committee, the issue as to whether Communist M.P.s or full-time trade union officials should be allowed to be members of the Executive Committee (Manchester Central opposed the former, and Birmingham Branch the latter). There were still some proposals for withholding the Party from parliamentary activity.

¹ *Communist*, September 9, 1920.

² *Ibid.*, October 21, 1920.

³ *Ibid.*, December 23, 1920.

⁴ Preparatory document on Constitution and Rules (with suggested amendments) C.P., 24 pp. Pamphlet—*Constitution and Rules Adopted by Special Delegate Conference*, Manchester, April 23-24, 1921.

The Constitution adopted at the Third Congress established the name of the Party as “Communist Party of Great Britain” and its affiliation to the Communist International.

It laid down the fundamental “Objective” of the Party:

“The establishment of a *Communist* Republic of a socially and economically equal people . . . the total abolition of the present system of wage slavery through a social revolution. . . .”

It supported, as method of struggle for the winning of political power, the system of Soviets or Workers’ Councils and the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat for achieving the transition from capitalism to communism. The Constitution pledged the Party to “conduct an unflinching campaign against the power of capitalism”, and laid down the “obligations” of members of the Communist Party:

“The Party claims from its members loyalty and fidelity to the general will of the organisation, and insists upon the subordination of all other interests to those of the Communist Party. It expects of its members that they will impose a self-discipline and that they will respond to the Party’s demands and needs.”

The Rules laid down the structure of the Party, the basic unit or Branch with its Branch Committee, the District or Divisional organisations (London and Home Counties, Midlands, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire, North Wales, North of England, Scotland North and East, Scotland West and South, South Wales and such others as the leadership might find it necessary to create) with their elected Divisional Councils based on Branch representation; and Divisional organisers appointed by the Executive Committee in consultation with the Divisional Councils.

The Executive Committee was to consist of two representatives from each Division elected by the Divisional Councils, with a Sub-Executive of Chairman and five members to attend to Executive work between its sessions. Officers were to include a Chairman elected by Congress, a General Secretary, General Organiser, an Editor of the Party organ appointed and controlled by the Executive itself. Paid officials of the Party were not to be eligible for Executive positions.

The Rules laid down that Conferences¹ should be annual, that elected

¹ In the early days of the Party the words Congress and Conference were used loosely and interchangeably. We shall refer to them as Congresses.

Members of Parliament and local Councillors should abide by the policy democratically decided by the Party. They laid down the membership subscription as 6d. per week, except for unemployed or sick, who were exempt from payment.

Need for a New Type of Organisation

It is easy in the light of later experience at home and abroad to be critical of formulations and clauses in the first Constitution and Rules adopted by the Party. In many ways they were a direct continuation of the Constitution, Rules and structure of the older socialist groups. What were the main weaknesses?

In the first place a very great weakness in the Constitution was the section on "Immediate Action". It is clear that there was not yet clarity on the task of a revolutionary party to act as the leading force in the *immediate* struggles of the working class and working people, to help them defend their interests from capitalist attack, to improve their conditions as far as possible within the framework of capitalism, to work to unite and help to lead into action all sections of the working people whether or not they had as yet come to see the need for *revolutionary* change and to help them, in the course of the struggle, to come to a clearer understanding of the road to socialism.

The Rules, in the second place, laid down a federal or geographical structure for the leadership of the Party, Branch representation on the Divisional Councils and Divisional representation on the Executive Committee. This was bound to lead to a weakening of the capacity of the leadership to lead, to a leadership of delegates with local loyalties rather than a strong leadership with loyalty to the Party as a whole, to a leadership who saw their responsibilities in particular areas or fields of work rather than in a general all-round political responsibility.

Thirdly, the Branch was established as the basic unit of the Party, but nothing was said as to the particular character of the Branch, its duties to lead the struggle in its own field of work. There was nothing, above all, on how the basic units of the Party should work in the factories, railway depots, pits, etc., the key centres for both immediate and revolutionary struggle against capitalism. The Branches were still, as in the older socialist groups, vague propagandist territorial groupings, not so organised as to be closely linked with the masses of the workers, to be able to know them, win them and lead them.

The first organisational steps, therefore, taken by the Party, the first organi-

sational principles that the Party adopted, were still the organisational principles and structure of the old socialist societies.

Experience and the struggle itself were to show to the Party that this “old fashioned” type of organisation was insufficient. No sooner was the Party founded than it found itself faced with tremendous responsibilities in the fight against intervention, against war, against the retreat and class collaboration of the right-wing Labour leaders in the face of the capitalist offensive. In this situation the small and young Party made, as we have seen, heroic efforts and, almost alone as an organisation, under attack from every side, held up the banner of class struggle, solidarity, internationalism.

But the organisational character of the Party, of its leadership, its Branches and its press, was not such as to enable it effectively to fulfil its responsibilities. More and more this became clear, through experience, to increasing sections of the leadership of the Party. Internationally the same experience was being undergone. And the demand grew in 1922 for a deep examination of Party organisation with a view to a radical reorganisation. By early 1922 the organisational position of the Party was extremely bad, and drastic steps were needed.

Membership was falling. Real sales of the *Communist* were not nearly so good as the rather rosy official figures (based on print rather than sales) tended to show. Towards the end of 1921 and in the early months of 1922 the weaknesses of the leadership became more and more apparent. The defects of the federal (or geographical) system of electing the Central Committee was not by any means something purely abstract. It meant that those nominated in the Divisions were not necessarily capable of national leadership, nor, even if fully capable, necessarily available to give the required leadership. Some of the most suitable people had been excluded by the federal system. Then there were what might be called “problems of origin”. S.L.P. men like MacManus and Bell found some difficulties in fitting in to what was primarily an ex-B.S.P. set-up, and in any case Bell was absent for a long period working with the Executive of the Communist International. Some of the ex-B.S.P. members of the Executive continued with the old B.S.P. methods of leadership. The arrest of Albert Inkpin, the most capable administrator of the Central Committee, and his imprisonment at the beginning of 1922, added to the problems. And all this, in the early months of 1922 began to add up to a very serious situation within the Party.

Demands for changes began to become widespread, especially among

the most active workers of the Party, but also amongst some of the older leadership including William Gallacher and William Mellor. Naturally enough much of this dissatisfaction began to turn into criticism of the existing Central Committee.

Moreover the defeats and retreats in the general industrial movement and the feeling that the Communist Party must improve its contact with the trade union movement, play a more effective part in stopping the retreat and winning the movement away from the right-wing leadership, stiffened the desire not only for changes in leadership and organisational structure but, though not yet clearly expressed, for changes in the style of and approach to revolutionary work.

It was at the Fourth Congress of the Party (St. Pancras Town Hall, March 18-19, 1922) that this dissatisfaction came to a head.

The demand for a radical change in organisational structure was greatly furthered by the discussion at the Third Congress of the Communist International (Moscow, June 22-July 12, 1921) where an important part of the sessions was devoted to organisational problems, and where, above all, Lenin's teachings and the experience of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were brought before the delegates from the revolutionary movements throughout the world. It was at this Congress that was adopted the Thesis on *The Organisational Structure of the Communist Parties*.¹ Fourteen delegates from the C.P.G.B. attended the Congress,² and on their return they began to report on the discussions. Tom Bell, returning from the Congress, wrote a series of articles in the *Communist*³ on the principles of democratic centralism, propaganda, agitation, press (including the need for a daily paper), Party structure and Party leadership. *But the leadership was slow to take action to bring about the necessary changes.*

At the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party a resolution on Party organisation was moved by Harry Webb, supporting in general the guiding lines on organisation adopted at the Third Congress of the Communist International, but not proposing any fundamental changes (the Executive was still to be on a geographical basis; no change in the nature of the Branches). On W. Gallacher's proposal it was agreed that a Commission should be set up to examine as quickly as possible the

¹ Pamphlet—*Decisions of the Third Congress of the Communist International*, Moscow, July 1921, pp. 29-59—"The Organisation and construction of the Communist Parties—The Methods and Scope of their Activity", C.P.G.B. 1921.

² *Protokoll des III Kongresses des KI*, Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale, Hamburg, 1921.

³ *Communist*, September 17, October 1, October 8, and October 22, 1921.

whole organisational position and make proposals to a further Congress. The dissatisfaction of the Party membership with the existing organisational position and with the attitude of the leadership to this question was reflected in the vote by 87 to 38 that the Commission should be appointed from outside the Executive.

A demand (from Liverpool) that the Commission should be appointed not by the Central Committee, but directly by Congress was defeated by 73 votes to 43. And, eventually, after considerable discussion, it was left to the Executive to appoint the Commission.¹

But the outvoting of the proposal of the old Executive, and the insistence that the Commission with wide powers should be selected from outside the membership of the Executive, was an important victory for those who were asking for radical changes.

The Party Commission and its Report

At the end of March 1922, the Commission, consisting of R. Palme Dutt, Chairman, Harry Pollitt and Harry Inkpin, was appointed by the Executive Committee.² By the terms of reference they were to consider the application to British conditions of the general organisational principles outlined at the Third Congress of the Communist International. In particular they were to consider the necessary revisions of the Constitution, the organisation at Party Centre and the Divisions, the mass work of the Party and its work in the mass organisations, Party press and propaganda. The Commission was empowered to call for reports from any Party organisation and to have access to all Party material. It was to make its report to a further Party Congress.

The Commission held its first meeting on March 29, and at once issued an appeal to all Party organisations, committees and individual members to send in reports, criticisms and suggestions. The gathering of material on Party membership, Party press and Party activity was extremely thorough, and all rosy or unproven figures or claims were fairly ruthlessly brushed aside. A first report including these figures constituted the first real census of the Party and it was here that it was revealed that the *real* membership of the Party was around 2,000 and the *real sale* of the *Communist* around 8,000.³

¹ Ibid., March 25, 1922. *Agenda and Resolutions for Policy Conference*, 4 pp. folder. Report of E.C. to 4th Congress of C.P.G.B., St. Pancras Town Hall, March 18–19, 1922, 16 pp. pamphlet.

² *Communist*, April 8, 1922.

³ This is based on information received in discussion with Harry Pollitt and R. Palme Dutt and on written comments from R. Page Arnot.

The Commission remained in almost permanent session, and after two preliminary reports to the Executive—on May 13 (“a virtual indictment of the existing administration of the Party”) and on July 31—the final report was presented as the main item to the Fifth Annual Congress of the Party, held at Battersea Town Hall, October 7-8, 1922.¹

The Report, first, summarised the character of organisation of the old socialist groups:

“The old type of socialist party was a loose association of propagandists. Its work was mainly confined to the platform and individual work. Beyond a general ‘programme’ of a theoretical character, its membership had little real common policy or concert in its work. The Branches worked on their own in their own locality save for the occasional visit of some national representative. ‘Headquarters’ were something separate from the ordinary membership; it served as a registry of members and subscriptions and dealt with ‘officials’ and ‘rank and file’, and a large proportion of the membership was inactive save for occasionally turning up at a meeting.”²

But this was not what was needed in the present position:

“All this is the exact opposite of a Communist Party. A Communist Party is the *leading* Party of the working class: it exists not to propagate a certain theory or doctrine but to give a lead to the working class, and all its work is organised for this purpose. . . .

“For this purpose it is not enough for individuals to be active in their sphere; their work must be part of a common campaign directed to the Party as a whole.”³

The Report considered the *existing* organisational position of the Party, including the Constitution and Rules adopted at the Third Congress. It outlined four main weaknesses:

- (i) The federal structure of the Executive stood in the way of the formation of a strong central leadership such as the situation demanded.
- (ii) The leadership was hampered by the absence of the necessary

¹ *Report on Organisation* presented to the Annual Conference of C.P.G.B., October 7, 1922, by the Party Commission. C.P.G.B., pp. 80, issued as inner Party document to Congress delegates and to Party organisations. To be known henceforth as Commission Report.

² *Ibid.*

³ Commission Report.

Departments and Committees at national level, with the result that everything was left to national organisers, and no efforts made to draw volunteers into national leading committees.

- (iii) The local organisations, with their old-type propagandist branches, were extremely weak.
- (iv) The organisation of the Party was not of such a type as to help in making links with the mass of the working class.

The Report put forward in great detail (and the detail was, in fact, one of the big weaknesses in the Report) its specific proposals for a new Party structure.

- (i) The federal basis of the Executive Committee should be ended. A small and strong Executive of some seven to nine comrades should be formed, bringing together the most capable members irrespective of where they lived. Congress should elect those they thought most capable of forming an all-round political leadership. Each member of the Executive would have his own particular field of responsibility but share in the general responsibility for the leadership as a whole.

Alongside this Executive, the Congress should also elect a larger body that would meet less frequently, which would be chosen both from different areas and different fields of work, and would be called the Party Council.

- (ii) In the areas there should be District Party Committees (D.P.C.s) responsible to the Executive and elected, subject to Executive approval, by District Congresses. Once again the D.P.C. would not as before be a federal type of organisation, but a body capable of giving all-round leadership to the work of the District.
- (iii) In the localities, in place of the old general area branches, there should be Local Party Committees (L.P.C.s or “locals”) elected by meetings of the members in the locality, and coming together not too frequently (perhaps once a month) for discussion of Party policy, general plans, review of work in the locality, particular campaigns involving the whole locality. In the meantime for regular and continuous work the L.P.C. should allocate its members to working groups, i.e. small groups carrying on work in some particular field—place of work, place of living, sphere of Party activity. Such working groups might be factory groups, street groups, groups in a block of houses, groups in a

particular industry, or groups working on some special activity like "Party training" or the selling of literature. The aim should be, in this way, to bring every member of the District into activity:

"Every member would have to be a working member, since he could not be a member of the Party at all unless he was a member of a working group."

- (iv) The Executive Committee should be divided into two main sections, one organisational (Organisational Bureau) and the other political (Political Bureau), and each of these bureaux should be in charge of a number of special committees (Parliamentary, Propaganda, Finance, Elections, Literature, Women's Work, etc.). Similar divisions with similar Committees should exist at D.P.C. level and the L.P.C.s should also have under them a number of committees.

An important part of the Commission Report dealt with the need for, and method of, reorganising the Party press, particularly the main Party organ.¹ The main organ of the Party should be "an organ of the workers' daily struggle". What was needed, the Report stressed, was a daily paper of the working class, and in the course of developing and improving the weekly organ of the Party, this should never be lost to sight. The conception of the Party organ as something close to the people, an organiser and agitator, would necessitate a complete change in the character of the *Communist*. What was needed was "a newspaper of the working class and not a small magazine of miscellaneous articles with a Communist bias". The paper must keep contact with its readers and develop a chain of worker-correspondents. There should be a maintenance fund for the paper. The paper should have a larger format, contain more news and more cartoons. The Editor would be under the authority of the Executive Committee, and the journal would rely to a large degree on Party organisation for distribution. Alongside the main Party organ there should be a theoretical paper, "a review of Party thought".

The Report then dealt, still in great detail, with the importance of the work of Communists in factory, workshop, trade union and other mass organisations. It proposed the organisation at different levels of "Party fractions" ("Party organisations in representative or delegate

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-35.

bodies”) and Party nuclei or groups of Communists working together in factory, workshop or mass organisations:

“The factory or workshop (under which term is included the dock, mine, mill, ship, foundry, railway, shipyard or other place of work) is the real unit of the working class, and should be the main field of our activity.”

The Report laid down the need for systematic “Party training”, stressing the importance of education for new members in the principles of Marxism. It outlined a system of reporting from L.P.C. to D.P.C. and from D.P.C. to Executive. It stressed the importance of political discussion, including polemical discussion inside the Party. Such discussion should precede important decisions on Party policy, but “once the decision has been reached, it should be loyally accepted by the whole Party”.

Finally, in the light of all these criticisms, principles and proposals, the Commission prepared a new draft of the Party Statutes and Rules. Incorporating the organisational proposals outlined above, the Statutes and Rules reformulated the condition of membership:

“to all who accept the principles and statutes of the Party, and who support the Party by taking an active part in one of its organisations as well as by assisting it financially.”

The Report laid down a period of probation during which prospective members would serve as candidates before becoming full members. It laid down clearly the central role of the Party Congress as “the supreme authority of the Party”. It proposed a “Control Commission” responsible to Party Congress for checking on finance and the conduct of Party affairs, and with full powers of enquiry. The Party dues, it was recommended, should be reduced to 1s. per month.

There had been some expectation within the old leadership that there would be considerable opposition to the fairly sweeping proposals of the Commission. In fact when the Report and Proposals were submitted to the Fifth, Battersea Congress (October 7–8, 1922) they were received with enthusiasm and adopted “without dissent or opposition”.¹

Indeed the degree of support for the work and report of the Commission was reflected in the voting for the new leadership, when R.

¹ *Communist*, October 14, 1922.

Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt were not only elected to the new seven-man Central Committee but stood at the top of the poll.¹

There is no doubt that the adoption of the Report was an important step forward for the Party. For the first time the question of the *organisation* of a revolutionary party had been seriously considered in Britain; for the first time a break was made with the old type of propaganda branch of the socialist group. The political content of the changes adopted was essentially correct:

1. An organisation was proposed that would help to bring the membership as a whole into activity. Members were to be organised not for general propaganda, not as a club, but where they lived and worked, and in such a way as to allow them to move into action.
2. For the first time special stress was laid on the key role of Communist organisation in the factories.
3. A break was made with the old federal principle of leadership. A form of national leadership was adopted by which the best comrades could be elected as an all-round political leadership.
4. The elements of a real combination of democracy and centralism were introduced into the constitution of the Party. General Party discussion was to precede policy decisions but policy once adopted was to be binding. All leading committees were to be elected (E.C., D.P.C., L.P.C.), but once elected their authority was to be accepted for the scheduled period of their election. A regular system of reporting was established from below upwards as well as a regular method of submitting Party decisions and leads from the leadership to the members.
5. Important proposals were made with regard to the Party press, particularly with regard to the transformation of the Party organ from a magazine to a mass and militant paper, reflecting the life and struggles of the working class, acting as organiser and agitator.

¹ The vote at the election was R. Palme Dutt 79, Harry Pollitt 68, MacManus 67, Gallacher 58, Murphy, 49, Stewart 43, Deacon 37. Not elected Newbold 27. Tom Bell was elected as Political Secretary and Albert Inkpin as Organising Secretary.

At the first meeting of the new Central Committee it was constituted into two bureaux:

Political Bureau: R. Palme Dutt, A. MacManus, J. T. Murphy, R. Stewart, and Thomas Bell (Secretary).

Organising Bureau: George Deacon, W. Gallacher, H. Pollitt, Albert Inkpin (Secretary). (See *Communist*, October 14, 1922, *Daily Worker*, December 15, 1956. and Report of C.E.C. on the Organisation of the Party since the Battersea Congress in *Report of Sixth Congress of the C.P.G.B.*

Inevitably the Commission's Report was not without its weaknesses. It has sometimes been felt that in taking the necessary steps to replace the old-type propagandist Branches by groups on an organic base, factory, street, housing settlement, etc., there was a certain complexity and unclarity in the new types of local organisation—working groups and L.P.C.s—that were put in their place.

But perhaps the most important criticism is the complexity of the new system of organisation as a whole and the too direct take-over from the forms of organisation that had been outlined at the Third Congress of the Communist International.

There was, it is true, a warning contained in the Commission Report against the mechanical application of its proposals to small Party units, but the multiplicity of committees proposed (Executive, two sections each leading eight departments; D.P.C., two sections each leading seven departments; L.P.C. at the head of nine committees; nuclei and fractions in different organisations and committees at national, district and local levels; a complex method of horizontal and vertical relations between all types of committees; a detailed scheme of reporting, etc.) made the complex organisation proposed in the Report inappropriate for a very small Party just beginning to work under the difficult conditions of capitalism. If the members of the Party had "worked to rule", the whole Party would rapidly have come to a stop. There was initiated at this period a certain fetishism of committee and circulars that was for a very long period to weaken and bedevil the work of the Party.

The warnings contained in the Preface to the Report against seeing the reorganisation as "a fancy scheme which must be carried out in every detail on the morning after the Conference", that what had been outlined was the description of "a fully developed system of organisation", that what was needed was a "gradual building up", were not sufficient to guard against the dangers of over-organisation and over-complexity.

But whatever weaknesses there may have been within the proposals, the adoption of the Commission's Report marked an important advance for the Party, an enthusiastic revival of Party activity, and the culmination of this struggle of approaches at the Fifth Congress was something of a turning point in Party history.

In the "Last words of the Commission"¹ they stressed that:

"the work has only been begun. The real task now begins . . .

¹ *Communist*, October 14, 1922.

the new form of organisation will have to be made real, not only in the centre and the leading organisations, but in the daily life and activity of every group and every member of the Party."

Carrying out the Reorganisation of the Party

A very active period followed in which the Commission Proposals, now, after the Fifth Congress, decisions of the Party, began to be carried out.

At the first meeting of the new Central Committee (October 13, 1922)¹ a special temporary Organising Committee, under the chairmanship of Albert Inkpin (R. Page Arnot was a member), was appointed to help and supervise the carrying through of the reorganisation. This Committee continued its work, meeting weekly (52 meetings in all), right up to September 1923. Its main tasks were the working out and organisation of the new Districts and District Party Committees, the mapping out of the Local Party organisations and helping to establish their requisite leading committees, and the registration of the membership.

The task of delimitation of the new Districts and the setting up of the new District Party Committees was virtually completed by the end of January 1923. District Conferences were convened by the old Divisional Organisations and attended by representatives of the Central Committee and, in all, ten such Congresses were held and ten District Committees established.²

When, on March 25, 1923, an Executive meeting, enlarged to include leading members from all over the country, was held to report on the progress of reorganisation,³ Albert Inkpin could report that

¹ Report of the C.E.C. on Party Organisation to Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B., in *Report of Sixth Congress*, p. 52.

District	Date of Congress	E.C. Representative	District Organiser appointed
London	Nov. 26/22	H. Pollitt	E. W. Cant
Manchester	Dec. 2/22	A. Inkpin	James Crossley
S. Wales	Dec. 2/22	R. P. Dutt.	J. R. Wilson
Liverpool	Dec. 9/22	G. Deacon	I. P. Hughes
Sheffield	Dec. 9/22	W. Gallacher	E. Lismier
Glasgow	Dec. 23/22	R. P. Dutt	A. Ferguson
Bradford	Jan. 6/23	H. W. Inkpin	E. H. Brown
Birmingham	Jan. 13/23	G. Deacon	W. Brain
Edinburgh	Jan. 20/23	E. W. Cant	H. Robertson
Tyneside	Jan. 27/23	H. W. Inkpin	J. Tearney

(*Ibid.*, p. 53.)

³ Minutes of Extended Executive, March 25, 1923.

besides the District Committees (D.P.C.s), the organisation of L.P.C.s was in progress all over the country.

The setting up of the new District organisations left a number of the old-style branches in different parts of the country too distant from any of the newly-established Districts (for instance Aberdeen, Dundee, Barrow, Nottingham, Plymouth, Southern Counties), and it was, therefore, decided to attach these "outlying local organisations" directly to the Party centre under the supervision of the Central Organisation Bureau.¹

By the beginning of 1923 a number of Party Departments had been established, working under the Political and Organisational Bureaux of the Executive.²

Prior to the Commission's work there had been no detailed record of Party membership. That is why it is so difficult to give any accurate estimate of membership before the middle of 1922. Now, at least, a detailed system was developed for checking on the position of membership. It could be calculated that at the Foundation Congress of the Party at the beginning of August 1920 the delegates to that Congress represented somewhere between 4,000–5,000 members. But with the loose calculations of membership in those days this cannot be taken as an accurate figure. It would seem³ that a real figure of those who *definitely* had come into the new organisation by mid-1921 was probably around 3,000, dropping to nearer 2,000 (this is a hard figure) by the time the Party Commission made its drastic check-up in mid-1922. From then, and especially after the Battersea Congress, the figure began steadily to rise.⁴ By March 1924 membership was probably just under 4,000.⁵ Early in 1923 the composition of the Party was roughly 86 per cent full and 14 per cent probationary members, and, of the full members, 86 per cent men and 14 per cent women. About one-third of the Party members were unemployed.

Based on the Commission's Report, the Battersea Congress had established a Party Council. This was a body that could be called together by the Executive at regular intervals for consultation, composed of members in living contact with the Districts. Two such meetings were held; the first on February 10–11, 1923, which discussed such problems as the results of the Fourth Congress of the Communist

¹ Report of C.E.C. on Party Organisation, in *Report of Sixth Congress*, p. 53.

² *Communist*, January 6, 1923.

³ From discussions with Harry Pollitt, R. Palme Dutt, etc.

⁴ Report of C.E.C. on Party Organisation in *Report of Sixth Congress*, pp. 55–61.

⁵ See Report of C.E.C. on Organisation to 7th Congress of C.P.G.B., p. 144.

International, problems of united front and relations with the Labour Party, and reviewed the process of Party reorganisation. A second meeting of the Council was held on August 6, 1923, after the return of Executive members from attending a meeting in Moscow of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (E.C.C.I.)

The change that took place in 1922 within the British Communist Party and its leadership, far from being, as some have claimed, the imposition by the Communist International of a new leadership on the British Party, was much rather the reverse.¹ The emergence of Pollitt and Dutt to roles of leadership in the Party arose as the result of the dissatisfaction within the British Party with the main section of its existing leadership, as a result of the defeat of the Executive at the St. Pancras Congress, the appointment of a Commission from members outside the Executive, the work of that Commission, the support that it received from the membership, the adoption of its proposals at the Battersea Congress, and the election there of a new Central Committee with Dutt and Pollitt topping the vote. Indeed, the official Communist International representative to the British Party had supported the old Executive majority against the newcomers, and when, at the Special Commission on Britain at the Third Enlarged Plenum of E.C.C.I. (June 12-23, 1923, attended by three representatives of the Soviet Party, and some ten others, as well as by most members of the British Executive)² the proposal had been made that Pollitt should be General Secretary of the British Party, it was members of the International Executive who opposed.

At the British Commission there was discussion of various organisational problems of the British Party, and various suggestions made were accepted and supported by the British Party Council which discussed them on August 6, 1923. The Political Bureau was reorganised to consist of five full-time Party workers,³ each in charge of a specific Department and available to meet daily, and the Central Committee was enlarged to include comrades prominent in mass and industrial work—J. R. Campbell, Wal Hannington, Arthur Horner. Helen

¹ See correspondence of R. Palme Dutt in the *Times Literary Supplement* of March 5, 1966, and following issues.

² R. Palme Dutt, W. Gallacher, Albert Inkpin, J. T. Walton Newbold, H. Pollitt, and R. Stewart went to Moscow together with E. Lismar of the Party Central Commission. Pollitt had to return before proceedings began and took no part in it. Others who attended were J. R. Campbell, Arthur Horner, Frank Smith and Ned Watkins who were in Moscow at the time for a Conference of R.I.L.U. (Report of C.E.C. on Party Organisation in *Report of Sixth Congress*, pp. 50-51).

³ Bell, Dutt, Gallacher, MacManus and Pollitt (*ibid.*, p. 51).

Crawford had already been co-opted as women's representative and C. M. Roebuck (Andrew Rothstein) was co-opted after the return of the Executive from E.C.C.I. but before the Party Council.

The Party Press

With the foundation of the Communist Party in August 1920, *The Call*, organ of the B.S.P., ceased to exist and, on August 5, 1920, there appeared the first issue of the weekly journal of the C.P.G.B., the *Communist*, which continued publication, without interruption, until its 131st number of February 3, 1923, when it was replaced by the *Workers' Weekly*.

The *Communist* started with the circulation of 8–9,000, and held that level until the end of the year. At the beginning of 1921, Francis Meynell took over the position of Editor from Fred Willis (who had been the Editor of *The Call* and had taken over the *Communist*) with the assistance of R. W. Postgate. In some ways the change of leadership represented a considerable improvement in the journal. Meynell was a typographical expert of great repute and Postgate deeply interested in working-class history. The lay-out improved immensely and the journal was enlivened by the biting "Espoir" cartoons, but still it was rather more a weekly magazine of socialist theory and history than an agitator and organiser, and it was very isolated from the life and struggles of the British working-class movement. There were excellent studies on the Paris Commune, the First International, developments in the Soviet Union, but the treatment of all the immediate agitations and class battles, such as the miners' lock-out, in no way reflected their importance or the role of the Communists within them.

Nevertheless, the *Communist* was a militant paper. It attacked capitalism and the capitalist offensive. It made clear the role of the reformist trade union leaders. *It was not afraid to speak*. And thus, with the reorganisation in 1921, circulation began to rise.¹ It was 9,500 at the time of the first issue in the new format (January 20, 1921) and already by January 27, 13,000 (with a reprint of a further 5,000 the next day). On February 5, 1921, it had risen to 25,000.

The rise in circulation precisely at this moment when the capitalist offensive was preparing, was a threat and warning to reaction. By the end of January large orders were coming in from wholesalers all over the country. Suddenly, W. H. Smith & Son returned 1,000 copies, and the wholesalers' boycott that was to last for many years began. On

¹ Ibid., February 12, 1921.

February 5, W. H. Smith, Horace Marshall and Wymans, three of the biggest firms in the trade, refused to take a single copy, though it was known that many of their local newsagents were putting in orders.¹

An urgent appeal was made by the Party Centre to Branch Secretaries and the membership. It was made clear that henceforth the distribution of the paper depended not on normal channels but essentially on the Party membership and organisations, on all sympathisers and supporters of the Party. The challenge was taken up, and 25,000 of the February 5 issue were distributed despite the boycott (with two further reprints each of 2,000). In mid-February sales rose to 40,000 and continued to rise, reaching a peak of some 50,000 at the time of the miners' lock-out. In May 1921 (the moment of the raid on the Party offices) circulation even touched 60,000, despite the extremely difficult organisational position in May-June.

The capitalists used other methods of attack besides the distribution boycott. Towards the end of April 1921, the Rt. Hon. J. H. Thomas, M.P., P.C., issued writs for libel against the editors, printers and publishers of the *Communist*.² One of the objects of the police raid on the Party in May was (and with some success) to intimidate the printers. A fortnight after the raid, the National Labour Press, controlled by the I.L.P. and involved as printers in the prosecution of Albert Inkpin, General Secretary of the Party, came to an agreement with the Director of Public Prosecutions and, without any warning, stopped publication of the *Communist* half way through an edition, announcing that it had given an undertaking not to print any more Communist material.

Other printers were not eager to compete for the honour of capitalist scapegoat and, in great haste and difficulty, the Party had to make arrangements with a printer who had but one lino and a flat-bed machine, with whom it took three days to run off 50,000 of a single sheet (four pages) and two days to set the type.

This made it still harder to make the *Communist* a topical newspaper, and encouraged the editorial conception of a Marxist magazine. The award to J. H. Thomas, in December 1921, of £2,000 damages for libel by Mr. Justice Darling and his jury (who considered that it was libellous to accuse Thomas of treachery at the time of Black Friday) did not make things any easier.³ And the "impartial" position of

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., April 23 and April 30, 1921.

³ Ibid., December 10, 1921.

British justice was made clear in the *Daily Telegraph*, which wrote after the award, of Mr. Thomas:

“His sanity, his moderation, his readiness to compromise and to settle, his constitutionalism, have given him his commanding position in the Labour world, and have won for him the widespread respect which he enjoys . . . this libel action will teach them (the Communists) that there are limits to the toleration of public men . . . and that a British jury is a most unlikely body to convict of treachery to Labour a leader who realises that the welfare of the whole community is higher even than that of organised Labour, and can never be served by civil strike or the violent overthrow of constitutional society.”

With the peak period of the miners' struggle passing, with the continued boycott, financial difficulties, and, it must be admitted, aided to a degree by the character of the paper itself which, despite improvements in lay-out, illustrations, cartoons and educational articles, remained, under the editorship of R. W. Postgate who took over from Meynell¹ in July 1921, and T. A. Jackson who took over from Postgate at the end of May 1922,² very divorced from the life and struggles of the British working-class movement, circulation began to fall again. By November 1921, its print was officially 30,000, and, by the time of the Fifth Congress of the Party, in October 1922, about 20,000. In fact, the Party Commission established, in its drastic examination of realities, that its real *sale* in mid-1922 was around 8,000.

It became clear that drastic steps were needed to change the character of the paper, and this, as we have seen, was one of the main issues taken up by the Commission on Party Organisation, whose recommendations were accepted at the Fifth Congress. The Executive Committee, in January 1923, discussed the method of transformation, and it was decided to replace the *Communist* as from February 10, 1923, by the *Workers' Weekly*.³ The important change was not the new name and the new format, but the new content and the new approach.

The paper was to reflect:

“The daily life and struggles of the working class in fields, mines, railroads, factories and workshops . . . it will stand for the *workers'* interests against all the forces of capitalism.”

¹ Executive Committee Report to Fourth Congress of Communist Party, March 1922.

² *Communist*, May 20, 1922.

³ *Ibid.*, January 27, 1923.

The new paper, edited by R. Palme Dutt, made its appearance in February. From the beginning it attached a special importance to letters from worker correspondents. In the first year of the papers' existence over 2,500 letters and reports were received from workers, and of these 894 were printed practically in full and 755 made use of in various articles and editorials. Early in 1924 such letters were continuing to arrive at a rate of around 100 weekly.¹ A Maintenance Fund was initiated which has been a feature of the Party journal from that time onwards. Denied, in the main, advertisements, normally the essential source of revenue for weekly and daily papers, it depended on the support of the working class. In the first three months the first £100 was collected.² The character of the paper was radically changed; economic conditions began to be reflected, strikes and other struggles to be reported. A special organisation was set up to campaign for the circulation of the paper. New efforts were made to win readers and supporters for the distribution of the paper, and by early March 1923, some 60 Distribution Committees were working regularly.³

The circulation began once again rapidly to rise. The first issue, of which 19,000 were printed, sold out within 24 hours of publication.⁴ The issue of March 10 reached 48,000,⁵ of March 31 over 50,000.⁶ Less than £25 had been spent on advertising.

Most of the editing and nearly all the distribution was carried out by volunteers. Indeed, at the outset of the *Workers' Weekly*, the only "full-time" worker on the editorial staff was the Editor himself who had, as well, other political commitments.

The publication of a central organ on a weekly basis was not the only activity of the Party during its first three years in the field of Communist press and publications. In May 1921, a monthly Marxist theoretical paper, the *Communist Review*, was launched.⁷

The *Communist Review* provided an excellent source of information on the international working-class movement, on the early days and problems of building socialism in Russia and on the activities of the Communist International. Many of the leading Soviet revolutionaries

¹ Political Report of C.E.C. to Sixth Congress in *Report of Sixth Congress*, pp. 77-78.

² *Workers' Weekly*, April 28, 1923.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, March 10, 1923.

⁴ *Ibid.*, February 17 and March 10, 1923.

⁵ *Ibid.*, March 10, 1923.

⁶ *Ibid.*, March 31, 1923.

⁷ The *Communist Review* came out regularly in these early years of the Party. For the record, Volume I contains the issues from May-October 1921, Volume II from November 1921 to April 1922, Volume III from May 1922 to April 1923 and Volume IV from May 1923 to April 1924.

of the day wrote for it. Andrew Rothstein (C. M. Roebuck), William Paul, Maurice Dobb, and J. T. Murphy were amongst the regular British writers, and for many readers it was their first introduction to Marxist theory. It was extremely informative on the struggles of the colonial peoples of the British Empire, and active in developing solidarity with them. In those early days the English edition of *The Communist International* was irregular and, even when issued, the police and postal authorities made its arrival uncertain.

The first issue appeared of the *Labour Monthly*, under the Editorship of R. Palme Dutt, which, established in agreement with the Party as a broad organ of the trade union and labour movement with a Marxist political direction, rapidly won itself a high reputation in the militant section of the labour movement, and was to continue with an unbroken record until today. The record of pamphlet literature was very positive.¹

In general, following the Battersea Congress, publication of pamphlets and leaflets began to increase. Pamphlets were published on *How Areas Work*, on *Communist Party Industrial Policy*. In March 1923 a Publications Department was set up at King Street which in June–July published pamphlets on *The United Front* and *Towards a Communist Programme*, followed in September by a *Handbook of Party Organisation*. At the end of the year Bogdanoff's *Short Course of Economic Science* was published as a book.

It should be added that during this period there was a first short experiment with a Communist daily in connection with the General Election of November 1922. Two editions were edited, one in London and one in Scotland.² Some 8,000 were distributed daily in Scotland and more than that in London. Distribution was carried out entirely by the workers themselves, and it was a valuable experience, a proof of the capacity of the Party for mass work. A correspondent describes a meeting of London Party workers involved in producing and distributing the *Daily Communist*:

“Party workers swarmed round the Centre to receive the reports and turn them into items of news, make up the paper, write up special subjects, run messages, go off to interview someone or hunt out some piece of news from a locality. King Street was a hive of cheerful work right through the night. . . .

¹ See Appendix at end of Vol. II.

² The *Communist Daily*, London Edition (three issues), No. 1, November 13, 1922 to No. 3, November 15, 1922, and the *Daily Communist*, Scottish Edition (four issues).

"Party workers waited long hours through the cold and rain at their appointed stations for their bundles of the paper which were so slow in coming, then at once to race off and distribute them to other comrades who scattered to sell them in the streets or in the work-shops, at election meetings, or from door to door."¹

The first issue of the Scottish edition, edited by Harry Pollitt (November 10, 1922) was sold out as soon as it arrived, and it was, incidentally, the first time in the history of the Scottish working-class movement that they had produced a *Sunday* paper.

The fight for a Communist press was not an easy one. The very effort laid bare the real content of the much vaunted freedom of the press of Western capitalism. Any millionaire was perfectly *free* in Britain to set up his press, office, staff, etc., and to run his paper *freely* according to his own desires and his own interests, provided, by definition, he owned the necessary millions. The Communist Party was free from millions of pounds, and its "freedom" was to collect painfully and in pennies from those who were in the main *free* of property and often of employment, enough money, virtually from week to week, to pay the printer.

A capitalist journal normally exists in the first place on the revenue of advertisements paid for by fellow capitalists, who are quite *free* in their own interests to deny such advertisements to a workers' paper.

The capitalist press was, in the main, distributed by a complex apparatus depending on a few great wholesalers and special train services run by the railway companies. These were quite *free* to deny their services to a workers' press.

Under British freedom any insulted citizens can take out writs of libel against the author, printer and publisher of the insult. The capitalist press has less fear of such laws, even when their fellow capitalists decide to invoke them against them; (i) because they have the money to pay, and the very scandal will probably increase sales to compensate; (ii) because the chief victims of capitalist slander are of the working class who cannot afford the process and risks of litigation. The capitalists and their supporters are equally *free* to issue writs of libel against the workers' press, its authors, publishers and printers, and these, *as they cannot afford to pay* (where is the equality of an award of £2,000 against Lord Beaverbrook or the *Workers' Weekly*?) find themselves deprived of printer, publisher, etc. The Court is *free* to convict or not to convict,

¹ *Communist*, November 25, 1922.

but is it strange that judge and jury should find it libellous to call a right-wing Labour leader a traitor to his class, but right and proper to call a Communist a traitor to his country?

In this context, summing up the results of the first three years of the Communist press, it can be said:

1. The process of transforming the Party organ into a popular “agitator and organiser” only began in this period. The old traditions still sat heavy on the Party. There was altogether insufficient contact with the life and struggles of the workers. Style was often heavy and language, to say the least, involved. There was fear of treating questions that interested the workers, as for instance, those of sport. (When “A Realist” dared to write to the *Communist* of January 14, 1922, that reports of football matches might increase the circulation, he was violently rebuked the following week for the mere thought that such “dope” should be included in a revolutionary journal.)
2. Only a first beginning was made with the theoretical press of the Party in this period. There was as yet no real planned theoretical work or deep development of the application of Marxism to British problems and conditions, though the *Communist Review*, a much neglected paper, and the *Labour Monthly*, were beginning work in this field.

But the balance was overwhelmingly favourable:

1. Against a background of lack of funds, living on the brink of bankruptcy, distributors’ boycott, attacks by the law, fines and imprisonment, a workers’ press, principled and revolutionary, was established and maintained, a regular weekly organ published, a theoretical paper was launched, and the *Labour Monthly* inaugurated on Communist initiative.
2. There was, over the period, a marked improvement in the content of the Party’s weekly paper, and the first steps were taken in the process of its transformation from a literary-political review of the old type into a fighting paper of the working class, reflecting and organising their daily struggles.
3. There was built up, in this period, in and around the paper, a force of many thousands of people ready to support, distribute, and, many of them, to write for the paper. The boycott was defeated.

Following the Battersea Congress a committee of Party members

active in working-class education circles, e.g. *Plebs*, was formed to consider methods of promoting education in Marxist theory. A number of syllabuses were prepared, and a fair number of "Party Training Groups" formed in the various Districts, particularly, at this period, in London and Glasgow.

Some further organisational innovations were made in this period. One of the weaknesses of the earlier Marxist groups had been their lack of co-ordinated struggle, of organised campaigning. In the period the Communist Party began to organise regular campaigns, not only on the burning industrial and international issues as they arose, but campaigns in relation to its own organisational development.

The first of such campaigns was the *Red Week* of Communist agitation and recruiting from September 8-15, 1921, popularised by a special issue of the *Communist* on September 10, and resulting in the organisation of several hundreds of meetings all over the country.¹ The second was the *Special Propaganda Week* of February 17-25, 1923² aiming at campaigning for Party policy, making recruits to the Party, and winning new readers for the *Workers' Weekly*.

Results of Reorganisation

It can be said, therefore, that the struggle within the Party, and the changes that resulted in organisation, approach and leadership, created in the Party a new enthusiasm, and led not only to a renewed recruiting to the Party but a marked increase and improvement in its public activity and mass work, and this in its turn was a major factor in developing a left and militant force which began to stem the disastrous retreat.

Harry Pollitt was reflecting that advance when he wrote in October 1923 on the lessons of the Plymouth T.U.C.:

"We are just beginning to feel our way; we are just getting a foothold inside the organised working-class movement, we are just beginning to force the official leaders to see that we mean business and that we are here to stay."³

And William Gallacher, writing on the twentieth anniversary of the

¹ *Communist*, September 10, 1921. There were 140 meetings held in London and the Home Counties, 70 in Yorkshire, etc.

² *Workers' Weekly*, February 10, 1923.

³ Harry Pollitt, "Lessons of Plymouth", in *Communist Review*, October 1923 (Vol. IV, p. 261).

Party's foundation, looking back to the days of 1922–1923,¹ noted the advances made. At the end of 1921, he wrote, "the membership was rapidly fading away, the finances of the Party were chaotic and the organisation had almost completely broken down". Then came St. Pancras, the Commission, Battersea and "with the . . . final report of the Commission the Party may be said to have found its feet."

WORK AMONGST THE YOUTH

It was in this period, too, 1920–1923, that the Communist Party first began to turn its attention to organised work amongst the women and the youth. In January 1922, a Women's Department was set up at Party Centre,² under the leadership of the Scottish comrade, Helen Crawford, and work began, though as yet on a small scale only.

The field of work amongst the youth was one in which the British Labour Movement was especially backward. Young socialist organisations had come into existence in some continental countries as early as the 1880's and 1890's, in Belgium, France, Germany and the Scandinavian countries, for instance. The reformist leaders of the Second International, scared stiff at the almost natural rebelliousness of the youth, who always turned towards the militant wings of the Parties, and loth to concede organisational autonomy, slow-pedalled the development of international young socialist organisation.³ Eventually, in March 1907, a provisional International Youth Bureau was set up, and, in connection with the August 1907 Stuttgart Conference of the adult International, an International Federation of Socialist Youth organisations, with Karl Liebknecht as President. The next few years were characterised by ever-increasing militancy on the side of the youth (particularly on issues of militarism and internationalism) and ever-growing "diffidence" on the side of the adult reformists.

With the outbreak of World War I and the betrayal of the Second International, the youth had an opportunity to show their colours, and the International Youth Conference, held at Berne, Switzerland, in April 1915, was a challenge to the chauvinism of the Second International. The first International Youth Day, called under the banner of

¹ W. Gallacher, M.P., "The Fight for the Communist Party", in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 22, No. 8, pp. 429–430.

² *Communist*, March 11, 1922.

³ See G. Tschitscherin, *Aus der Geschichte der Jugend-Internationale*; Arvid Vretling, *Youth in the Class Struggle*, Y.C.I. (1921); *A Short History of the Y.C.I.*, Y.C.L., Britain (1929); Mick Jenkins, *History and Programme of the Y.C.I.* (unpublished MS., 1929).

anti-militarism and international working-class solidarity, was held on October 3, 1915. There seems to be no record in all this period of contact between militant British youth and the Youth International.¹

With the end of the war, an initial founding Congress of the Young Communist International was held, illegally, at Berlin at the end of November 1919, attended by 19 delegates from 14 countries, but without representation from Britain.² It was only at the Second Congress of the Y.C.I. (which opened at Jena, in Germany, in April 1921, and was continued in Moscow in June 1921), that direct contact was made between the international movement and the revolutionary youth in Britain.³

The position in Britain of socialist organisation of the youth was extremely weak. There had been some success by the Clarion movement under Blatchford at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of this century.⁴ There was a Socialist Sunday School Movement, active in certain areas, particularly Scotland, before the war. But there was no deep tradition of special socialist youth activity or organisation. Whilst the British bourgeoisie, with its usual cunning and experience, turned very early to the development and subsidising of mass youth organisations—Scouts, Guides, Boys' and Girls' Brigades, social clubs, and religious organisations—the right-wing reformist leaders of British Labour feared youth like the plague, and even the militant sections sadly neglected them. Thousands of working-class youth joined the various sections of the labour movement—the trade unions, the I.L.P., the Marxist groups, etc.—but until the end of the war there was no real political organisation developed of the socialist youth apart from a few local associations.

The Socialist Sunday School movement (with its paper *Young Socialist*) founded at the beginning of the century, was still very active in many parts of the country in the years that followed the war. Many a future working-class leader and, indeed, leader of the Communist Party, received his or her first taste of socialist education in its ranks. But it was rather a children's than a youth organisation, catering for those between around seven and fifteen years old.

In the course of 1920, two new, still small, youth organisations came into the field—*The Young Labour League* and the *Young Socialist League*.

¹ The author stands open to correction from readers, and would welcome any information on this subject.

² *A Short History of the Y.C.I.* (Y.C.I., 1929).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The Clarion Cycling Club, for instance, was extremely successful amongst the youth.

The Young Socialist League,¹ led by Harry Gilbert and James Stewart, which was the more militant of the two, itself emerged out of the Socialist Sunday School Movement; it accepted the class struggle and had a strong anti-militarist internationalist appeal. The Young Labour League,² whose first President was Frank Hodges of the Miners' Federation, was more inclined towards the Labour Party, though on the left of it.

At the end of December 1920, following a meeting of the leaders of the two organisations,³ a merger was agreed, and a new organisation, *The Young Workers' League*⁴ established, of which Harry Gilbert was the Secretary, though a section of the Young Labour League maintained its own independent existence. The Young Workers' League held its first National Conference at the International Socialist Club, City Road, London, at the end of March 1921.

Later, in 1921, there was a further merger, this time between the Young Workers' League (and its publication, the *Young Worker*) and the International Communist Schools Movement (and its paper *Red Dawn*);⁵ and after a referendum of Branches, the *Young Communist League of Great Britain* (Y.C.L.G.B.) was set up early in October 1921, with a Provisional Executive Committee and its paper, the *Young Communist*.⁶

The first National Conference of the Y.C.L.G.B. was held in London early in August 1922,⁷ and by this time it had Branches in London,

¹ See James Stewart, *An Appeal to the Young*, pamphlet of Workers' Socialist Federation, May, 1920:

"The object of the Young Socialist League is to organise the young workers of the country by establishing study circles and classes in economic and industrial history, as well as social entertainments. It is anti-militarist . . . it is an international movement, it will keep in touch with the organised young workers of Europe and America" (pp. 10–11).

See also *Communist*, September 30, 1920—article by H. Gilbert, "The Case for the Young Socialist League".

² See speech of Dr. W. MacGregor Reid, of Clapham Labour Party, at Twenty-fourth Annual Conference of Labour Party in *Report of 24th Conference of Labour Party*, London, October 7–10, 1924, p. 118.

³ *Communist*, December 30, 1920.

⁴ See advertisement in *Communist*, March 19, 1921.

⁵ Formal unity was achieved at a Conference in Birmingham in August 1921, and then ratified by a referendum of Branches (see Minutes of E.C. of C.P.G.B., 1922).

⁶ *Communist*, October 8, October 22, November 26, 1921 and *E.C. Report to 4th Congress of C.P.G.B.*, March 1922.

⁷ Amendments and Resolutions the First Annual Conference of Y.C.L.G.B. held at Brotherhood Church Hall, London, August 5–6, 1922 (12 pp. pamphlet).

Manchester, Liverpool, Barrow, Sheffield, Leith, Porth and a number of other industrial centres.

As soon as the Y.C.L. was formed discussions took place with the Communist Party on its relations with the adult Party, and the first mutually agreed position was that the Y.C.L. would be "under the political direction of the Party", but organisationally independent,¹ whilst the two organisations would be mutually represented on each other's Executives.

The Y.C.L. was at first a very small organisation and its activities extremely political, mainly in the field of anti-militarism and international solidarity. The first campaigns included the commemoration of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in January 1923,² distribution of a Manifesto Against War,³ organisation of a Week of Struggle against Unemployment at the beginning of May 1923 and an International Children's Week (June 24-30, 1923).⁴ They initiated, rather grudgingly, a number of sports and recreational activities—sports, cycling, rambling, camping, etc., but strictly at this stage within the narrow limits of their own organisation.

The meeting of the National Council of the Y.C.L. on June 16-17, 1923 marked a certain step forward. Steps were taken to organise educational activity, the reorganisation of Branches was discussed on the basis of groups in the factories, and preparations were made for the Second National Conference. At the same meeting it was agreed to co-opt on to the leadership of the League three young members of the Communist Party—J. Lyne, Bill Rust and D. Springhall. In September 1923 the first big public demonstration was organised by the Y.C.L.—a Trafalgar Square Rally to celebrate International Youth Day, with Tom Mann amongst the speakers.⁵

The Second National Conference of the Y.C.L. was held on October 27-28, 1923, at the Brotherhood Church Hall, London, with 32 full delegates from some 24 Branches.⁶ By this time Bill Rust had become Secretary, and H. Young, National Organiser. Congress discussed the fight against militarism, solidarity with the youth in the colonial countries, the extension of the childrens' organisations, the develop-

¹ *Communist*, December 3, 1921, "Organisers' Notes and Answers".

² *Ibid.*, January 13, 1923.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923.

⁴ *Ibid.*, June 9, 1923.

⁵ *Ibid.*, September 1, September 8, 1923. Other speakers included Moylen and Jarvis for Y.C.L., and Wal Hannington for C.P.G.B.

⁶ *Ibid.*, November 2, 1923. *Resolutions of Second National Conference of Y.C.L.G.B.*, October 27-28, 1923 (Y.C.L. pamphlet, 36 pp., 3d.).

ment of sports and cultural activities. But at the centre of discussion were the questions of the struggle on the economic issues of young people and the problem of reorganisation of Y.C.L. Branches. On the first of these issues the Congress stressed the importance of winning the trade union movement to take up all questions that concern the youth, and, at the same time, decided that it should be compulsory for all members of the Y.C.L. to be members of their appropriate unions. On the second, it was agreed that the existing type of Y.C.L. Branch was inadequate, particularly in that it did not put the Branch in direct contact with factories, pits and depots, nor in a position to lead the immediate struggles of the young workers in those all-important fields.

It was decided, therefore, to try out a new form of organisation known as “Shop nuclei” (factory groups) by which:

“the basic unit of the Y.C.L. must be the shop nucleus . . . [they will] organise in the very places where the young workers are to be found, i.e. the factories, the workshops and mills.”¹

The area branches would continue to exist, co-ordinating all the shop nuclei in the area and including those youth also who were not eligible for shop nucleus membership, organising campaigns, social activities and educational classes.

The Second Congress finally revised the Rules and Constitution of the Y.C.L. which confirmed the relations between the Y.C.L. and the Party (“the Y.C.L. is politically subordinated to the Party, but organisationally autonomous”). The Conference elected a new Executive Committee² and a broader National Y.C.L. Council.³

Though in these first years the Y.C.L. suffered from a strong sectarianism that tended to cut it off from the mass of the youth, and though it tended, too, to become a small replica of the adult Party, it *did* mark an important step forward for the British working-class movement that had so long and so completely neglected the problems and the organisation of the youth. The Labour Party in this 1920–1923 period on several occasions refused to promote any national organisation of Labour youth despite repeated requests from its own branches and from the Young Labour League.

¹ Resolution “On Shop Nuclei”, in *Resolutions of 2nd Conference of Y.C.L.G.B.*, pp. 2–8.

² Rust, Lyne, Young, Goldberg, Springhall, Fineberg from the former Executive, along with Duncan (Aberdeen), S. Goldberg (Renfrew) and Gildersleeve (London). R. Palme Dutt attended the meetings of the Y.C.L. Executive as representative of the Party.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, November 2, 1923.

In the course of 1922-1923 especially, a number of Constituency Labour Parties and also the Young Labour League raised the question.¹ The position was considered by the Organisational Sub-Committee of the National Executive, who felt "that the organisation of young people within each Labour Party should be encouraged, but that it is essentially work for the local Labour Parties, and that junior sections should be an integral part of the local organisation".

Thus by the end of 1923 a beginning had been made, but only a beginning, of a Communist youth organisation. Despite all its weaknesses, its small size, its sectarianism, its tendency to turn inwards, it was of great credit to the Communist Party that, for the first time in British Labour history, the youth were encouraged and helped (though insufficiently) to organise *themselves* to develop *autonomous* youth organisation, to be active in the trade union movement, and to raise the issues of the youth inside the adult movement. The Communist Party was the first to raise its voice against the deep traditional neglect of the youth in the British labour movement. Unlike Social Democracy, Communism had no fear of youth rebellion, but saw it as a strong ally in the fight for socialism.

THE VENDETTA

The Communist Party was small. When it first began it had some 2,000-3,000 members. It was bereft of funds, and despite all the propaganda of "Moscow Gold" that filled the columns of the capitalist and right-wing Labour press, its full-time members in this early period lived virtually from hand to mouth—often on the dole. Sometimes the first Divisional Organisers received a wage of 30s. a week. Not rarely, this wage failed to materialise. Sometimes it was just "deferred".

The fight for funds for the Party press was a daily one, and the weekly organ now rose to 12 pages, now sunk to a desperate four, with printers and publishers harrying for the payment of debts. No man or woman or youth came to work for the Communist Party for cash or comfort. No one paid them to join the Communist Party, though from the days of the Party's foundation, it was a practice for the capitalists to offer payment and reward to those who would publicly leave or repudiate the Party.

Apart from the *Daily Herald*, which was then playing a progressive role, the whole capitalist and reformist press joined the attack on the

¹ *Report of 23rd Conference of Labour Party, London, June 26-29, 1923, p. 65.*

Party from July 31, 1920. It was essential to keep the Communist Party with its militant policy out of the Labour Party, to blacken it, smear it, whilst at the same time maintaining, as a reserve, a “respectable left” (Socialist not Communist) to attract those who were rebelling against reformism and had to be kept from the Communist contagion. So the I.L.P. press added its voice to the attacks on the Communist Party.

Perhaps the clearest recognition of the significance of the Party, despite its lack of members and experience, was the direct attack made on it—persecution, trial, imprisonment—by the capitalist state. In fact, almost from its first foundation, the state carried out a virtual vendetta against the Communist Party.

Arrests began almost at once. By October 1920 already a number of comrades, including the Midlands organiser, were arrested and sentenced.¹ Sylvia Pankhurst (then still a Party member) was charged in November and finally imprisoned for six months in January 1921. C. L. Malone, M.P. was charged with sedition for a “Hands Off Russia” speech on November 7 (1920) and given six months in the Second Division.

With the miners’ struggle, the Black Friday betrayal and the firm stand of the Party, the attacks redoubled. Arrests grew more common. By early May 1921, some 35 leading Communists had been arrested; by the end of May over 60; by the end of June over 70. These are recorded figures; in fact, the numbers were much higher. By the end of June² the score was that ten Communists had received hard labour sentences—one to six months; 31 second division sentences of one to six months; 15 had been fined an average of £20 each; three had received fines of £50–£100 besides imprisonment; five were awaiting trial, and three were out on bail. London, Birmingham and Sheffield were the blackest areas, but the arrests were pretty widespread.

One after the other, the Party leaders were picked up and charged on some or other pretext—William Gallacher (three months’ sentence, February 25, 1921); Harry Webb (two months, February 1921); Albert Inkpin, George Peet, Bob Stewart, Harry Pollitt, Jack Leckie (of the Executive), George Fletcher of Sheffield, etc.

No law or statute was too ancient or inappropriate to serve as basis for a charge. Communists were accused of “sedition” under D.O.R.A., of speeches “likely to lead to a breach of the peace”. One was accused

¹ *Communist*, October 21, 1920.

² *Ibid.*, June 25, 1921.

of declaring that the miners "hew coal for the profit of the capitalists". Against another it was held that "he jeered at Mr. Thomas"; another was guilty of belonging to a Party which though (officially) legal was "clearly seditious". In fact their guilt lay in that they had spoken up for the unemployed, the miners, against the capitalist system.

Considerable support for the arrested Communists came from the broader labour movement. A "Release the Prisoners" Trafalgar Square Rally on March 20, 1921, brought 9,000 into the Square, despite the rain, with amongst the speakers Tom Mann and Neil Maclean, M.P. Meetings were organised all over the country including a great rally of 15,000 on Glasgow Green.¹

The Raids

In May 1921 came the "reward" for the firm Communist attitude in the industrial struggles. On May 7 police raided the Party Centre at 16, King Street and arrested Albert Inkpin, the Party's Secretary, on a charge of "doing, or attempting to do acts calculated to cause sedition and disaffection among the civilian population".² The charges were, in the main, based on the publication of the Theses of the Second Congress of the Communist International.

Papers were grabbed, the contents of drawers ransacked and confiscated. Pamphlets and books were scooped up from the shelves of the bookshop that then formed part of the King Street offices. The office of the Editorial Board of the *Communist* was ransacked too.³ On the following day Bob Stewart, the acting Party Organiser, was also arrested.

At the same period other raids were carried out on the offices of the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. and of the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement. Police entered and searched in his absence the house of A. J. Cook of the Miners' Federation and other miners' leaders. A summons was served on 16 officials of the Miners' Federation.

The *Communist* was ejected from its press, forced to come out under

¹ *Ibid.*, March 26 and April 2, 1921.

² *Ibid.*, May 21, 1921.

³ Most of the documents were never returned. The Editor of *Communist*, after much protest and pressure, did succeed in getting Scotland Yard to return a copy of the Bible (*Communist*, October 8, 1921). For the sake of history it should be added that Arthur MacManus's gold watch was also confiscated and not returned, which gave rise to the cartoon showing him holding out his chain, with the caption inspired by the *Communist Manifesto*—"he has nothing to lose but his chain". MacManus was greeted very often at meetings in the following weeks with tender enquiries after his watch.

censorship with gaping white gaps, but never was its publication interrupted for a single issue.

Inkpin was sentenced to six months' hard labour on three counts under D.O.R.A. at the end of June 1921. After the dismissal of his appeal he was finally imprisoned in January 1922.

Other forms of pressure and persecution accompanied direct arrest and imprisonment. Scores of plain clothes police haunted Party meetings and Party offices, and began to follow around Party activists and members of their families. Letters between Communists and addressed to Communists were opened wholesale, correspondence delayed, telephones tapped, provocateurs from time to time inserted into the movement.

Great Communist "plots" began to be discovered by the capitalist press. At the end of December 1920 a Midlands Party meeting, held in a local hotel, was served, instead of by waiters, by dressed up local detectives, who were quickly spotted and asked, in the local language, to remove themselves.

A correspondent, hearing this but misinterpreting it, reported a sinister meeting of Red international agents presided over by a much-demanded Colonel Bugaroff.

In March 1922, all sections of the capitalist press discovered a great "Red Plot" ("Secret Communist Order", *Mail*; "Mischievous of the Communists", *Chronicle*; "Communists Stir up Revolt", *The Times*, etc.) which turned out to be the publication of a statement on the engineering crisis.

Arrest, following around, slander, victimisation at work—there were no methods forgotten in this early effort to crush the Communist Party. In fact, they all failed.

One thing was very clear right at the outset of the foundation of the Communist Party. It was still very small; it still made many mistakes; it still lacked confidence; it still had very much to learn; but *already it was feared and hated by the capitalists*.

The Communist Party of Great Britain was founded on July 31, 1920. From August 1, 1920, it has been the most attacked, slandered, smeared organisation from the side of the British capitalist press.

This immediate and consistent "recognition" of the Communist Party by the British bourgeoisie and by the right-wing reformist leaders was the highest compliment they could have paid it.

Perhaps there could be no more certain proof of the role of and need for the Party.

CHAPTER II—APPENDIX I

First Five Communist Party Congresses, Date—Venue—Main Subjects Treated

First Congress (London Unity Convention), London, July 31–August 1, 1920. *Main contents:* Establishment of C.P.G.B. Discussions on Parliamentary activity and affiliation to Labour Party.

Second Congress (Leeds Unity Convention), Leeds, January 29–30, 1921. *Main contents:* Widening of C.P.G.B. to include C.L.P., C.P. (B.S.T.I.). Support for Statute, Thesis, Resolutions adopted at Second Congress of Communist International.

Third Congress (Manchester Conference), Manchester, April 23–24, 1921. *Main contents:* Adoption of Constitution and Rules.

Fourth Congress (Policy Conference), St. Pancras Town Hall, London, March 18–19, 1922. *Main contents:* Resolutions on united front, industrial policy, reaffirmation of application for affiliation to Labour Party, for a mass Party. Decision for a Commission to examine Party organisation.

Fifth Congress, Battersea Town Hall, London, October 7–8, 1922. *Main contents:* Adoption of Report of Party Commission on Party organisation. Resolution on unemployment and war in the Near East.

CHAPTER II—APPENDIX II

Timetable of Labour Party–Communist Party Negotiations on the Affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party, 1920–1923

<i>Date</i>	<i>Reference</i>
1920	
AUG 1 Decision of C.P.G.B. Unity Convention (First Congress) to affiliate to L.P., by 100 votes to 85.	Report of Unity Convention.
AUG 10 C.P. makes first application to Labour Party for affiliation.	Pamphlet: <i>The Communist Party and the Labour Party</i> , C.P.G.B. 1921. Also: Report of 21st Annual Conference of the L.P. Brighton, June 21–24, 1920.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Reference</i>
SEPT. 8 National Executive of Labour Party considers request for affiliation and decides to reject.	Ibid.
SEPT. 11 L.P. N.E.C. replies to C.P. rejecting affiliation as objects of C.P. not in accord with Constitution, Programme of L.P.	Ibid.
SEPT. 23 C.P. letter to L.P. asks for further explanation of reasons for rejection in view of fact that L.P. was supposed to be a broad organisation containing workers and organisations of different views. Such difference of views had been permitted in the past.	Ibid.
OCT. 21 L.P. reply. No change. "Insuperable differences" between L.P. and C.P.	Ibid.
NOV. 4 C.P. letter to L.P. Refutes charges of "disruption". Again requests reasons for rejection and asks for same rights as other affiliated organisations.	Ibid.
NOV. 18 L.P. to C.P. Nothing further to add. Will refer to Annual Conference at Brighton, June 1921.	Ibid.
1921	
JUNE 21–24 21st Annual Conference of Labour Party. Debate on affiliation. "Previous Question" carried by large majority.	Report of 21st Annual Conference of L.P., June 21–24, 1921, pp. 158–167.
JUNE 30 Fresh C.P. request to L.P. for affiliation.	Report of 22nd Annual Conference of L.P., Edinburgh, 1922.
JULY 12 Letter considered by N.E.C. of Labour Party who reply that there is nothing new in situation.	Ibid.
NOV. 16 (?) Letter from C.P. to L.P. forwarding support of Glasgow Trades and Labour Council for further C.P.–L.P. discussion and proposal that two Executives should meet.	Ibid.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Reference</i>
DEC. 7 Letter considered by N.E.C. of L.P. and sub-committee of five appointed to receive C.P. representative.	Ibid.
DEC. 13 L.P. letter to C.P. agreeing to receive C.P. representatives.	Ibid.
DEC. 29 First meeting of representatives of the two Executives at Labour Party office.	Ibid., also Tom Bell, <i>British Communist Party</i> , p. 68. W. Gallacher, <i>The Rolling of the Thunder</i> , pp. 37-38.
1922	
JAN. 4 N.E.C. of L.P. adopts report of its Sub-Committee and decides to submit questionnaire to C.P.	Report of 22nd Annual Conference of L.P.
JAN. 6 Questionnaire submitted.	Ibid.
MAY 16 (?) C.P. reply to questionnaire sent to L.P.	Ibid., and <i>Communist</i> , June 10, 1922.
MAY 31 N.E.C. of L.P. considers C.P. reply to questionnaire and decides to recommend "no change of policy" to 22nd Annual Conference.	Ibid.
JUNE 1 L.P. decision reported to C.P.	Ibid.
JUNE 9 C.P. considers L.P. reply and replies to L.P.	Ibid., July 1, 1922.
JUNE 27-30 Debate on affiliation at 22nd Annual Conference of L.P., Edinburgh.	
AUG. 12 C.P. Manifesto <i>Who is Splitting the Workers' Movement?</i> Maintains request for affiliation. No candidates of C.P. to oppose L.P. candidates at General Election.	Ibid., Aug. 12, 1922.
OCT. 7-9 Battersea (5th) Congress of C.P. decides on renewed application for affiliation to L.P.	
DEC. 9 E.C. of C.P. issue statement "Labour Party Refuses United Front". Renews call for united front and for affiliation.	Ibid., Dec. 9, 1922.

Date	Reference
1923	
JAN. 13 "Open Letter to the E.C. of the National L.P." from Tom Bell, Political Secretary of C.P. includes slogan "March Separately—Strike Jointly".	Ibid., January 13, 1923.
FEB. 10–11 C.P. Party Council meeting decides on new application for affiliation.	Ibid.
FEB. 17 C.P. "Open Letter to L.P., I.L.P., General Council of T.U.C. and all Socialist Groups".	Ibid.
FEB. 26 C.P. letter to L.P. making renewed application for affiliation.	<i>Workers' Weekly</i> , March 3, 1923.
MAR. 10 C.P. "Open Letter—To all Members of the L.P." appeals for their support for affiliation, and against removal of C.P. members from L.P.s in the localities.	<i>Workers' Weekly</i> , March 10, 1923.
MAR. 29 L.P. N.E.C. considers new request of C.P. and rejects it, referring decision to next Annual Conference.	Report of 23rd Annual Conference of L.P., London, June 26–29, 1924.
JUNE 26 C.P. Manifesto addressed to L.P. Conference.	<i>Workers' Weekly</i> , June 30, 1923.
JUNE 26–29 23rd Annual Conference of L.P., London. Debate on affiliation. Affiliation rejected but "eligibility clause" withdrawn.	Report of 23rd L.P. Conference, pp. 186–9.
END OCTOBER C.P. letter to L.P. asking for full confirmation of eligibility of C.P. members for individual membership of L.P. and for election to delegations.	<i>Workers' Weekly</i> , Dec. 21, 1923.
DEC. 15 Letter from National Agent of L.P. to Arthur MacManus confirming that Communists are eligible for election as delegates and for individual membership of L.P.	Ibid.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Reference</i>
DEC. 22 (?) Letter of C.P. to L.P. proposing that L.P. N.E.C. should receive representatives of C.C. of C.P. to discuss questions of C.P. members standing for Parliament as L.P. candidates.	Report of 6th Congress of C.P.G.B., May 17-19, 1924, p. 68.

CHAPTER II—APPENDIX III

Results of Communist Candidates at the General Election of 1922

COMMUNISTS AS CANDIDATES OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Motherwell

<i>J. T. Walton Newbold</i>	<i>Communist</i>	8,262
Ferguson	Independent	7,214
Maxwell	Liberal	5,359
Colville	National Liberal	3,966

Dundee (two seats)

Scrymgeour	Prohibitionist	32,578
Morel	Labour	30,292
MacDonald	National Liberal	22,244
Churchill	National Liberal	20,466
Pilkington	Liberal	6,681
<i>William Gallacher</i>	<i>Communist</i>	5,906

(2) COMMUNISTS WITH LOCAL, BUT NOT OFFICIAL LABOUR SUPPORT

Greenock

Sir G. P. Collins	Independent Liberal	10,520
<i>Alec Geddes</i>	<i>Labour (Unofficial)</i>	9,776
Denholm	Conservative	8,404

Bethnal Green N.E.

Edwards	Liberal	5,774
<i>W. Windsor</i>	<i>Labour (Unofficial)</i>	5,659
Hoffgaard	Conservative	2,806
Jones	National Liberal	1,780

(3) COMMUNISTS STANDING AS OFFICIAL LABOUR CANDIDATES

Battersea North

<i>Shapurji Saklatvala</i>	<i>Labour</i>	11,311
Hogbin	National Liberal	9,290
Albu	Liberal	1,756

Bethnal Green S.W.

Harris	Liberal	5,152
<i>J. J. Vaughan</i>	<i>Labour</i>	4,034
Wilson	Conservative	3,474

(4) COMMUNIST SYMPATHISERS STANDING AS OFFICIAL LABOUR CANDIDATES

Gloucester

Sir J. Bruton	Conservative	7,922
<i>M. Philips Price</i>	<i>Labour</i>	7,871
Stanton	Liberal	6,050

CHAPTER II—APPENDIX IV

Short Biographies of Communist M.P.s—1920-1923
(up to that date only)

(1) MALONE, Lt.-Col. Cecil John L'Estrange¹

Born 1890, Dalton Holme, Yorkshire. *Education*: Private schools; Royal Naval College, Dartmouth; Royal Naval College, Greenwich, Entered Royal Navy 1905. 1918 First British Air Attaché, British Embassy, Paris and Air Representative, Supreme War Council, Versailles. *Elected M.P.* for East Leyton as Coalition Liberal, December 1918. *Visited Russia* in 1919, publishing on return "The Russian Republic". Foundation Member of Communist Party. Sentenced to six months' imprisonment for seditious speech. Lapsed from Communist Party in mid-1922. Publications as Communist M.P.: "The Humbug Parliament", pamphlet, October 1920; "What are a Few Churchills?", pamphlet, March 1921.

(2) NEWBOLD, J. J. Walton, M.A.²

Born 1888, Newchurch, Lancs. *Education*: Buxton College, Manchester University. *Politics*: University Fabian Society, Manchester,

¹ *Labour Who's Who*, 1924, Labour Publishing Co. Ltd., p. 112.

² *Communist*, November 4, 1922; *Labour Who's Who*, 1924, Labour Publishing Co. Ltd., p. 123.

1912-1913; joined I.L.P. 1910, E.C. member Lancs. Divisional Council I.L.P. 1911-1912; E.C. Plebs League 1917-19. Active research worker on social and political questions. Stood as Labour candidate for Motherwell, December 1918, polling 4,135 votes. Author of "How Europe Armed for War", 1916; "Politics of Capitalism", B.S.P., 1918; "Marx and Modern Capitalism", B.S.P., 1918; "The Menace of American Capitalism", B.S.P., 1918; "Capitalism and the War", 1918. Adviser to Ernest Bevin at the Dockers' Enquiry of 1920. Member of E.C. of Labour Research Department, 1922-1923. Joined C.P.G.B. with left-wing group of I.L.P. in March 1921. *Elected* as Communist M.P. for Motherwell, November 1922. *Publications* as Communist M.P.: "The Doom of a Coalfield", pamphlet, November 1921. Speeches: "Unemployment", "Against the Warmongers", "Snowden's Socialism Riddled", August-September, 1923.

(3) SAKLATVALA, Shapurji¹

Born 1874, Bombay, India. *Education*: St. Xavier's School and St. Xavier's College, Bombay—in his words "miseducated at Bombay University". Came to England, October 1905. *Joined I.L.P.* in Manchester 1909. *Joined C.P.G.B.* with left-wing group of I.L.P. in March 1921. Member of St. Pancras Labour Party and of Central London Branch of C.P. *Elected* Labour M.P. for Battersea North in November 1922. *Elected* as Communist M.P. for Battersea North in 1924.

¹ *Communist*, November 11, 1922. *Labour Who's Who*, 1924, Labour Publishing Co. Ltd. p. 148.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMUNIST PARTY DURING THE FIRST LABOUR GOVERNMENT: JANUARY–AUGUST 1924

The Main Problems—The 1923 General Election—Campaign—Communist Warning—Labour Government formed—Its Composition—The Labour Government and the Industrial Struggle—Rail Strike—Dockers—London Traffic Strike—Miners and Railway Shop-men—Builders—Unemployed Struggles—Housing—The Budget—Labour Government and Capitalist State—Birth and Growth of Minority Movement—Foreign Affairs—Rearmament or Disarmament—Labour Party, Communist Party and the Dawes Plan—Relations with Soviet Russia—Solidarity or Suppression?—Hands off China—Communist Struggle against Militarism and War—Labour, Communists and Imperialism; Two Opposing Approaches—The Communist Party and the Labour Party—Fight for Affiliation—Problems of Struggle for United Action—Problems of Party Organisation—Leading Committees—District Organisation—Recruiting—Campaigns—Press and Publications—Work amongst Women—Young Communist League—Fall of the Labour Government—The “Campbell Case”—The Zinoviev Letter—The October 1924 Election.

THE MAIN PROBLEMS

The Fifth (Battersea) Party Congress in October 1922 had provided a good basis not only for the reorganisation of the Party, but for a turn outwards, for the establishment of better contact with the trade unions and other sections of the mass movement, had put the Party in a better position to offer leadership on the many immediate issues that daily faced the movement as a whole.

As we have seen, in the last months of 1922 and throughout 1923 the considerable changes in Party approach, leadership and organisation led to a renewal of enthusiasm within the Party, a certain increase of membership, and an advance of the Party's influence, reflected particularly in the stiffening resistance to the employers' attacks and the

beginnings, though only the beginnings, of something like a working-class counter-offensive.

In the course of 1924 the improvement in the Party's work and influence was to continue, with the Battersea line, which, though criticised on individual points, was warmly endorsed by the Sixth Party Congress in May 1924. Some new advances were made in organisation—recruiting continued (though slowly), a continuous daily leadership was established in the form of the Political Bureau, a number of Party Departments were established (including the Industrial Department) and the increasing influence of the Party in the industrial field was reflected in the formation, on its initiative, of the National Minority Movement.

The Party, still in the process of improving its own approaches, influence and organisation, found itself facing complex problems in the year 1924, above all the problem of how best to work under the unprecedented circumstances of Britain's first Labour Government.

For the Labour Party, which enjoyed the mass support of the workers, was burdened with an extreme right-wing leadership. And a Labour Government whose coming to office, despite its minority position, was seen by the mass of the workers as a great victory, was bound to lead to fiasco and defeat, unless the working-class movement could press it, push it, force it into at least a certain measure of resistance to capitalism.

How to warn without being defeatist; how to criticise without helping the Tories; how to mobilise the workers for struggle and not allow them to "leave it all to the Government", how to explain the nature of reformism whilst working for the maximum unity in struggle of the working-class and progressive movement—these were the problems that faced the Communist Party throughout the period of the Labour Government, indeed right from the General Election of December 1923.

1923 GENERAL ELECTION

The Conservative Government that emerged from the 1922 General Election seemed, to eyes that saw only the surface of things, one that was solid and stable. With its slogan of "tranquillity" and Bonar Law as Premier, the first all-Tory Government since 1905 was ready to pursue the capitalist offensive at home and abroad. In May 1923, Bonar Law resigned through ill-health, and was replaced by his former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Stanley Baldwin. All seemed set for a

full five-year period of government, and yet, by the end of the year, the House had been dissolved and the way prepared for Britain's first Labour Government. What had happened?

The ostensible reason was the issue of tariff reform and protection. On October 25, 1923, the Prime Minister, addressing at Plymouth the delegates to the Annual Conservative Conference, and dealing, in the main, with the question of unemployment, let loose a mild bombshell:

"I have come to the conclusion," he declared, "that the only way of fighting this subject is by protecting the home market [loud and continued cheering]. . . . Having come to that conclusion myself, I felt the only honest and right thing, as a leader of a democratic party, was to tell them at the first opportunity I had, what I thought, and submit it to their judgement. [Cheers.]¹

Parliament, despite the King's reluctance to grant dissolution,² was dissolved on November 16, and the new General Election fixed for December 6. Many different reasons have been given for the election. Certainly one of Baldwin's aims was to re-unite the pro- and anti-Coalition sections of the Conservative Party and to stop any Conservative drift to merger or agreement with the Liberals. Moreover, Baldwin may well have feared a skilful pro-protection manœuvre by the wily Lloyd George.³ But these, along with the issue of protection itself, were auxiliary rather than essential reasons. The Baldwin Government would not have plunged into a General Election had it not felt compelled to do so, and "the compulsion came solely from events and nothing else".⁴ Partly it followed from the crass failure to come to any agreement with France following the Ruhr occupation, the collapse of the Baldwin-Poincaré negotiations, but the deeper cause lay in the internal developments of Britain. In the autumn of 1923 the economic situation was gloomy.

There was deep trade depression in textiles, engineering and ship-building. Above all, unemployment, which had declined to 1,290,947 (11.2 per cent of insured workers), in May 1923 had risen to 1,350,216 (11.7 per cent).⁵ The spectre of unemployment refused to be exorcised

¹ *The Times*, October 26, 1923.

² Harold Nicolson, *King George the Fifth—His Life and Reign*, 1952, p. 380.

³ Keith Feiling, *Life of Neville Chamberlain*, 1946, p. 108.

⁴ *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 5, No. 6, December 1923—R. Palme Dutt, "Notes of the Month".

⁵ Mowat, *Britain between the Wars*, p. 165.

with words, and with this fourth successive winter of unemployment the resentment and resistance of the working people was rising. The outright retreat of the previous years had, as we have seen, been halted. Wage cuts could no longer be imposed as before. There were growing demands for improved housing, for the improvement of relations with the Soviet Union:

"It is impossible to treat the tariff issue as the serious occasion of the dissolution. . . . Had the only object been import duties on manufactured articles, the Safeguarding of Industries Act was available and could easily have been adopted."¹

Indeed, when it came to the General Election, the Conservatives put forward only a vague and restricted programme of tariff reform. In all probability one of Baldwin's aims was to turn the attention of the workers away from the deeper issues of home and foreign affairs on to the tariff issue, and around this to stage a mock battle. But such a manoeuvre was only in part successful.

For the Liberals the election provided an opportunity to attempt to heal their internal division, and they were not slow to seize it. Whatever Lloyd George had planned, he at once became an adamant free-trader and offered to work with Asquith. A united campaign was agreed on, a single Manifesto issued, signed by both Lloyd George and Asquith, and a single list of candidates put forward.

The Labour leaders, as in the previous year, fumbled a great opportunity, and though they did campaign on *some* of the important issues—on the Ruhr occupation and reparations (with a half-hearted call for revision), on resumption of economic and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, on a programme of public works to alleviate unemployment, on a capital levy, etc.—they fell in the main into the trap of accepting the issue of free trade versus protection (a complete red herring as far as the workers were concerned) as the central issue of their electoral campaigning. They were slow to act, only moving a censure on the Baldwin Government *after* the Dissolution of the House had been announced. Deeply enmeshed in capitalist politics and capitalist society, they allowed the whole proceedings to be dominated by capitalist aims.

It was left, therefore, to the Communist Party to put forward the real and the deeper issues, both immediate and long term. The Party

¹ *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 5, No. 6, December 1923—R. Palme Dutt, "Notes of the Month".

published its Electoral Manifesto on November 20, 1923.¹ This put in its proper place the protection red herring:

“Protection and Free Trade are not the issue of the election. They are only rival schemes of rival sets of capitalists for their own profits. It is capitalism itself that has failed.”

It raised the fundamental issue of the capitalist system:

“All the attempts to reconstruct capitalism only mean driving the workers further down. The workers must organise to end capitalism and establish socialist production by all for all.”

Though the only real solution lay in the winning of political power by the working class and its allies, an immediate step forward could be taken

“when the workers for the first time unite to set up a government of their own responsible to carry on the fight against capitalism. Neither a Liberal Government nor a Tory Government, but a ‘Workers’ Government’—that is the watchword of the moment.”

Criticising the lack of socialist issues in the Labour electoral programme, the Communist Election Manifesto put forward a series of simple class demands on home and foreign policy: nationalisation of the land and factories with workers’ control commissions in every factory; state direction of imports and exports; state control of banks and credits; capital levy with suspension of interest payments on National Debt; minimum wage of £4 per week; maintenance at this level for all unemployed; six-hour day; radical measures to improve health, education and housing; full recognition and development of trade with the Soviet Union; withdrawal of all British troops from Germany; repudiation of the Versailles Treaty and the indemnities; an international conference of governments (including the Soviet Government) for the settlement of outstanding questions; proposals for total disarmament; complete liberation of all subject and colonial countries from British domination.

The implementation of such measures, the Manifesto explained, would not yet mean socialism. They could be carried out within the framework of the capitalist state, but the *struggle for them* was a necessary stage in the struggle for socialism. Their achievement would

¹ See *Workers’ Weekly*, November 23, 1923: also 4 pp. folder, *General Election 1923—Communist Party Manifesto*.

certainly meet implacable resistance from the side of the capitalists:

"Therefore only a Labour Government based on the working class and responsible to it, can and must carry out these measures . . . our immediate object in the present struggle must be the establishment of a Labour Government. But that Labour Government must base itself on the support and confidence on the masses of the working class, and be prepared to strike unhesitating blows in the interests of the working class."

The Communist Party put forward nine candidates for the General Election.¹ Two, J. Walton Newbold at Motherwell and William Gallacher at Dundee, directly as Communists, and the other seven—A. Ferguson (Kelvingrove, Glasgow), A. Geddes (Greenock), W. Paul (Rusholme, Manchester), M. Philips Price (Gloucester), S. Saklatvala (Battersea North), J. J. Vaughan (Bethnal Green South-West), and Ellen Wilkinson (Ashton-under-Lyne)—as candidates of the Labour Party.² Although not all received official endorsement, all had broad local Labour support.³ A. Ferguson, for instance, was adopted by the Kelvingrove Labour Party and endorsed by the Glasgow Trades and Labour Council; S. Saklatvala was unanimously adopted as candidate by the Battersea Labour Party; Gallacher, standing as a Communist at Dundee, had the support, as second candidate, of the local Branch of the I.L.P.⁴ J. Walton Newbold, also standing as a Communist, had the support (by a 36 to 5 vote) of the Motherwell and Wishaw Trades and Labour Council.⁵

The Communist Party called on the workers to support where no Communists were standing (and none were standing in opposition to Labour candidates) the candidates of the Labour Party, under the slogan "Return the Labour Candidates, but make them fight for the Communist Programme".⁶

The election results, with the small but important Labour gain in votes, reflected far more the growing dissatisfaction with the Conservative Government than enthusiasm for the vague policy of the

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, November 30, 1923.

² As far as I can ascertain, five out of the seven were officially endorsed by the Labour Party, whilst two, A. Ferguson and A. Geddes, only had local endorsement. M. Philips Price appears by now to have been a member of the C.P.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, November 30, 1923.

⁴ This was a two-seat constituency. E. D. Morel was the only official Labour candidate.

⁵ *Workers' Weekly*, December 7, 1923.

⁶ *Ibid.*, November 30, 1923.

Labour Party. The Conservatives remained the largest Party in the House, but their seats fell from 346 to 259 (votes from 5,599,122 in 1922 to 5,483,297 in 1923).

The Liberals had 158 seats compared with 117 (for the two groups together) in 1922 (and 4,297,121 votes compared with 4,113,012 in 1922). But the principal gainer was the Labour Party with 191 seats (4,356,167 votes compared to 142 seats, 4,235,457 votes), with a particularly important advance in the Greater London area.

The Communist candidates, facing a concentration of capitalist opposition, won no seats, losing Motherwell and Battersea North, but quite substantially increased their votes.¹ Walton Newbold in Motherwell increased his vote by 5.4 per cent, but faced with two instead of three capitalist candidates, lost the seat by just over 1,000 votes. Gallacher in Dundee raised his vote from just under 6,000 to over 10,000. A. Geddes (Greenock) increased his vote by 5.6 per cent but lost to the Liberal who now had Tory backing. Saklatvala (Battersea North) increased his vote by 9.1 per cent, and was only 186 behind the Liberal who won the seat with Tory backing (instead of facing two candidates as in 1922). J. J. Vaughan (Bethnal Green S.W.) increased his poll by 30.2 per cent and was only 584 votes behind the Liberal who gained the seat. A. Ferguson (Kelvingrove), with a vote of over 10,000, was only 1,004 behind the Tory winner. Ellen Wilkinson (Ashton-under-Lyne) was 1,605 behind the Tory who won the seat, and M. Philips Price at Gloucester lost to the Tory candidate by only 503 votes.

In all, the five Communist candidates who had stood previously increased their vote by 19.9 per cent and, together, the nine Communists, polled a total of 76,711 votes.²

Labour and Liberal together had polled over 8½ millions, surpassing the Tory vote by some three millions. The issue was wide open. Who was to form the government and under what conditions? Above all, should a Labour Government be formed that would inevitably depend on the Liberals for its majority in the House?

What Sort of Government?

A new Conservative-Liberal Coalition was, at this moment, hardly to be considered, for after all, the election had, on the surface at least,

¹ For details of Communist votes see Appendix I to this chapter.

² Thus giving the lie to what was later to become a regular right-wing slander that the Communists were an "electoral liability".

been fought around the issue of Tory-Protection versus Liberal-Free Trade. Yet there were some, in the City of London and other high places, who, to an extent overwhelmed by their own lurid anti-Labour propaganda, feared like the plague the establishment of a MacDonald Government and saw in it the "victory of Bolshevism", the end of the capitalist world.

But the more astute capitalist politicians, well trained in all the subtle cunning of British capitalism, well practised in turning temporary defeats and retreats to their own advance, in stepping one pace back to take two or three strides forward, were not slow to perceive all the political advantages in the establishment of a *minority* Labour Government, led by safe men and controlled by the Liberal vote. This deeper manoeuvre was shared by the more far-sighted of both Liberal and Conservative leaders.

Neville Chamberlain, for instance, came quickly to the conclusion that a "merely tactical" alliance to keep Labour out would only increase its strength for the future; whereas, in office, "it would be too weak to do much harm, but not too weak to be discredited".¹ Speaking on December 18, 1923,² Asquith assured his friends that "we still sleep more or less comfortably in our beds. . . . Capital steadily pursues its old routine of continuous, and, on the whole, prosperous investment. . . ." There could be no "safer conditions" in which to make the experiment of a Labour Government. In the *Sunday Observer* Mr. Garvin was to explain, when the Labour Government has been inaugurated:

"The Unionist Party definitely prefers a Labour Government on the present terms to any Liberal Government. . . . Mr. MacDonald's Government cannot attempt to continue in office under present restrictions without disrupting the Labour Party itself both in Parliament and in the country."

In an American study of the first Labour Government, Mr. Richard Lyman reaches the same conclusions:

"Some certainly feared even a minority Labour Government, but those experienced in the ways of Parliament, and familiar at first hand with the personal characteristics of such Labour Front Bench men as Snowden, Thomas and MacDonald, not to mention the

¹ Keith Feiling, *op. cit.*, p. III.

² J. A. Spender and C. Asquith, *Life of Asquith*, Vol. II, pp. 342-344.

solid and respectable trade unionists, knew perfectly well how little risk attended the ascension to the Cabinet of such men in such a Parliamentary position.”¹

In fact, far from risk:

“the more perceptive Conservatives realised that their party was bound to be the beneficiary when the discrediting of Labour took place. . . .”²

To Form or Not to Form?

On such a background the issue of whether or not to form a government presented the Labour Party with no simple problem, and it was natural enough that, within the Party, different groupings should make different approaches. To refuse office would have seemed to many Labour supporters a cowardly abdication and could only have led to disillusion. To accept, on the other hand, would make the Labour Government the prisoner of capitalism, unless the establishment of a government were the signal for the elaboration of a militant programme in the interests of the working class, and the defence of the programme were seen as a preparatory step for a new General Election.³

A small Labour group, which included David Kirkwood,⁴ Robert Smillie,⁵ George Lansbury⁶ and Pethick Lawrence⁷ took up the position that no government should be formed without a clear Labour majority.

A more clear-sighted section of the left—mainly the Clydeside M.P.s with a section of the I.L.P.—supported the formation of a Labour Government provided that it should at once, irrespective of its minority position in the House, put forward a definitely socialist policy and, after its inevitable defeat, make a new appeal to the electorate.⁸

But the dominant right-wing reformist leadership had a quite

¹ Richard W. Lyman, *The First Labour Government, 1924*, Chapman and Hall, 1957, p. 84.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 84–85.

³ See G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party*, p. 157.

⁴ David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt*, p. 219.

⁵ Robert Smillie, *My Life for Labour*, p. 304.

⁶ *Workers' Weekly*, December 21, 1923.

⁷ Interview with Pethick Lawrence, see Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁸ See, for instance, J. Maxton and J. Johnston in *Forward*, December 15, 1923.

different approach. They stood for the formation of a Labour Government, a government that should be "moderate" and inoffensive to the Liberals, a government that should not in any way whatever pretend to traverse the borders of capitalist society, that would make that society "work more effectively"; and some of them even welcomed the minority position as a weapon that could brake the activities of any more militant colleagues who might wish to push things further. This was the attitude, for instance, of MacDonald, Snowden, Thomas and Henderson.

Typically enough, the issue of government-formation was decided secretly at a dinner given by the Webbs, and attended by the reformist "junta" of MacDonald, Snowden, Thomas and Henderson.¹ Here, on December 11, it was agreed that a government *should* be formed—super-moderate and eschewing the capital levy or any other proposal that might be considered radical—and that MacDonald, as Prime Minister to be, should have a free hand (subject to suitable advices) in choosing his Cabinet. This decision was conveyed to and obediently echoed by the Labour Party Executive, which decided the following day that the Parliamentary Party "should at once accept full responsibility for the government of the country. . . ."² That such a government would inevitably be the prisoner of capitalism could not frighten or deter men whose minds had so long been imprisoned by the ideology of capitalism.

Henderson,³ Snowden⁴ and Thomas⁵ saw in such a government the fulfilment of their reformist dreams. Ramsay MacDonald:

"wanted to be Prime Minister: he wanted to be at the head of a government that would follow an exceedingly moderate and cautious policy in applying socialism, and he probably felt that the necessity of getting Liberal backing would serve him well in resisting the pressure of the Labour left wing."⁶

The view of the dominant right-wing group within the Labour Party of course prevailed. The scene was set for the formation of an extreme right-wing reformist government geared to tread carefully within the framework of capitalism, introducing perhaps here or there an

¹ Beatrice Webb in *Diaries, 1912-1924*, pp. 255-256. Fenner Brockway, *Socialism Over Sixty Years*, p. 206.

² *The Times*, December 13, 1923.

³ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 88; G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁴ Snowden, *An Autobiography*, Vol. II. ⁵ G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁶ G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

innocuous reform. At the famous Albert Hall Rally of January 8, 1924, MacDonald summarised his intentions:

“We are a party that even in the dreamland of imagination dwells in a social organisation fairer and more perfect than any organisation that mankind has ever known [Cheers]. That is true, but we are not going to jump there. We are going to walk there. . . . ‘One step enough for me’ [Laughter]. One step! Yes, my friends, on one condition—that it leads to the next step [Cheers]. If we shirk our responsibilities now we should inflict upon ourselves the defeat that our enemies could not inflict on us. So we accept our responsibilities.”¹

The “responsibilities” that MacDonald accepted were of maintaining, not of ending, capitalism. And the few short steps he was about to take led not forward to socialism but backward to a strengthened capitalism. Of this the Communist Party had warned from the very beginning.

Communist Warning

The Communist Party rejected the view of those who wanted Labour to refuse office without a clear majority, but at the same time it warned emphatically against the MacDonald conception of an ultra-moderate Labour Government dependent on the Liberal vote in the House of Commons. There was, the Party considered, only one correct thing to do in the complex circumstances, and that was for the Labour Party to take office on the basis of a definite working-class programme of immediate action, calling for the support of the working class and prepared to support this programme at a further General Election.²

On December 20 the Party, over the signature of its Secretary, Albert Inkpin, despatched a letter to the Labour Party³ expressing satisfaction at the Labour successes in the recent election, warning that the strongest capitalist resistance was to be expected against any progressive measures taken by a Labour Government, and declaring its readiness “to assist the Labour Party to the utmost of its ability”.

The letter outlined the type of programme and policy on which a Labour Government should be formed and should take its stand. Such a programme should include:

¹ *The Times*, January 9, 1924.

² *Workers' Weekly*, December 14, 21, 28, 1923.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, January 4, 1924.

- “(1) Full trade union rates for the unemployed against the time when useful work will be provided.
- “(2) Adoption of a national housing scheme, restoration of rent control, and no evictions.
- “(3) A complete application of the findings of the Sankey Commission, which involved nationalisation of the mines with a minimum wage for the miners.
- “(4) Immediate and complete recognition of Soviet Russia.
- “(5) A Conference of all nations, including Russia and Germany, for the settlement of all outstanding questions affecting the peace of the world.”¹

The Party had no illusions that a Labour Government with such a programme could survive any period with a majority in the existing situation in the House of Commons. Certain advantageous measures, like the recognition of the Soviet Union, for instance, could be put through immediately. But the *main* purpose of the Government would be to win support of the workers and prepare for a new challenge at a fresh election:

“The problem of the Labour Government . . . is a tactical problem. . . .

“A Labour Government must proclaim a working-class programme, and build on working-class support not only for the sake of the present, but still more for the sake of the future.”²

His Majesty's MacDonald

Parliament assembled on January 8, 1924, with the Baldwin Government still in office. On January 17, Clynes moved an amendment to the King's Speech that His Majesty's present advisers had “not the confidence” of the House, and was supported by Asquith. At the vote, on January 21, 138 Liberals joined the Labour M.P.s against the Government. The next day Baldwin resigned, and MacDonald received the King's commission to form a government. The meeting with the King was itself an augury of things to come. MacDonald was accompanied by Thomas, Henderson and J. R. Clynes, and the latter recounts the “fateful interview”:³

¹ Ibid.

² R. Palme Dutt in “Notes of the Month”, January 1924 in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. VI, No. 1.

³ Rt. Hon J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, pp. 343-4.

"We were, perhaps, somewhat embarrassed, but the little quiet man whom we addressed as 'Your Majesty' swiftly put us at our ease. . . .

"The King first created MacDonald a Privy Councillor, and then spoke to us for some time. He gave us invaluable guidance, from his deep experience, to help us in the difficult time before us when we should become his principal Ministers. I had expected to find him unbending: instead he was kindness and sympathy itself. Before he gave us leave to go, he made an appeal to us that I have never forgotten. 'The immediate future of my people, and their whole happiness, is in your hands, gentlemen. They depend upon your prudence and sagacity.'"

In the depth of their obsequious awe before their monarch, MacDonald and his colleagues, smoothed and flattered, were wanting in neither "prudence nor sagacity", nor the will that His Majesty's Ministers should fulfil his Royal wishes and protect "his people" from the demands of the working class. It is difficult to know who was more impressed—MacDonald with the King, or the King with MacDonald. That night, King George V wrote in his royal diary:¹

"I had an hour's talk with him, he impressed me very much; he wishes to do the right thing. Today twenty-three years ago, dear Grandmama [Queen Victoria] died. I wonder what she would have thought of a Labour Government."

If she could have seen it, even "dear Grandmama" herself would doubtless not have been unduly perturbed.

With the free hand bestowed on him, and with the royal blessing, MacDonald meanwhile was busy jigsawing together a suitable Cabinet. He consulted, up to a point, his closest colleagues like Henderson and Snowden, but showed a predilection for conferring with and taking advice from men outside or new to the ranks of the Labour Party like Lord Parmoor, an ex-Tory ecclesiastical lawyer, and, in particular, Lord Haldane, once a Liberal-imperialist and a Liberal Lord Chancellor.

As early as December 12, 1923, Lord Haldane wrote that MacDonald:

"offered me anything I chose if I would help him; the leadership

¹ Sir Harold Nicolson, *King George V*, p. 384.

of the House of Lords, the Chancellorship, Defence, Education, and the carrying out of my plans.”¹

Soon afterwards he reported that he had received:

“a message from Baldwin begging me to join the Labour Government . . . I will come in on my own terms.”²

And on that basis, precisely, he came in as Lord Chancellor and Chairman of the Committee of Imperial Defence.³

MacDonald's enthusiasm for advice from royalty and the House of Lords on the issue of government formation was coupled with a definite allergy to taking counsel with his more militant colleagues. George Lansbury, for instance, was asked on January 15, 1924, whether he would be willing to join the Cabinet, only to be told a few days later that plans had been changed, and to be offered a minor post without Cabinet status, which he rejected.⁴

*Composition of the New Government*⁵

The final composition of the new Government, formed without consultation with the Party or even its official leadership,⁶ augured ill for the future:

“It was a Cabinet of moderates, more representative of the upper and middle classes and new recruits to the party than of the trade union side and the old timers and left-wingers; only five of the twenty members of the Cabinet were trade unionists.”⁷

With MacDonald as Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, Snowden as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Henderson as Home and Thomas as Colonial Secretary, the right-wingers were firmly ensconced in the key positions of government. There was a generous importation into

¹ General Sir Frederick Maurice, *Life of Viscount Haldane of Cloan*, Vol. II, Haldane, 1915-28, pp. 137-147.

² Quoted by Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³ It is interesting that, immediately after the 1923 election, Haldane had written to Baldwin “The King's Government has to be carried on, and I think that you are the only man that has a chance to do this successfully.” See O. Baldwin, *My Father, The True Story*, 1956, p. 126.

⁴ Raymond Postgate, *The Life of George Lansbury*, 1951, pp. 223-227. Lansbury was convinced that this was due to an intervention by King George V.

⁵ See Appendix II to this chapter for details of the appointments.

⁶ Just like its Tory and Liberal predecessors. See R. T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, 1955, p. 309.

⁷ Mowat, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173.

the Government of noble (including some non-party) members, with Lord Haldane as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Parmoor as Lord President of the Council, Lord Thomson, former member of the Versailles Supreme War Council, as Secretary of Air, and Lord Chelmsford, a former colonial governor and Viceroy of India, as First Lord of the Admiralty. It was calculated at the time that fourteen members of the Labour Cabinet had served imperialism, directly or indirectly, in the capacity of members of previous governments, departments of state, governors of colonies or diplomatic missionaries.¹

Only two members of the new Government could, in any sense, be considered as left-wingers—John Wheatley as Minister of Health and F. W. Jowett as First Commissioner of Works—neither in decisive positions.

It was, perhaps, Snowden himself who most aptly summarised the composition of the first Labour Government and the impact of its announcement:

“The publication of the names of the Cabinet had a reassuring effect upon that section of public opinion which had been in terror about the advent of a Labour Government. The most timid Conservatives and the most frightened capitalists took heart from the presence in the Cabinet of men like Lord Parmoor, Lord Chelmsford and Lord Haldane; they could not believe that these men would be the instruments for carrying out the Socialist Revolution.”²

The “most timid” Conservatives could well feel safe. And the obsequious kow-towing to all the symbols of bourgeois respectability that characterised its first days and weeks only confirmed their first impressions. Beneath the comedy there was tragedy, for the conformism on trivialities reflected the reformist acceptance not only of the trappings, but the essence of capitalism.

Was it comedy or tragedy when at his first interview with the King, who expressed his distaste for the singing of the “Red Flag”, Macdonald assured His Majesty that “they had got into the way of singing this song and it will be, by degrees, that he hopes to break down this habit”;³ when Lord Haldane could describe a first unofficial Cabinet meeting of January 14 as “a remarkable display of competence and

¹ Bert Williams, *The Record of the Labour Government*, C.P.G.B. pamphlet, August 1924.

² Philip Snowden, *An Autobiography*, Vol. II, p. 607.

³ Memorandum by Lord Stanfordham of January 22, 1924, quoted by Sir Harold Nicolson, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

also of conservatism";¹ when Lord Stanfordham was training the Ministers, and the Webbs' Half Circle Club their wives, in court etiquette and correct society conduct;² or when the office-holding leaders anxiously discussed the necessity of court dress? It is recorded that the sight of the Labour Ministers in top hats called forth an angry interjection from a meeting of shipyard workers: "A workers' government, ye ca' it! It's a bloody lum hat government like a' the rest!"³

From such a "top hat government", as unsocialist in outlook as in composition, tied to the capitalist establishment by mind, body and position, there was little to be hoped but defeat and discredit, unless the working class could be mobilised to force them into at least a modicum of anti-capitalist action.

The Communist Approach

The Communist Party, as we have seen, favoured the formation of a Labour Government, but one that would put forward a militant programme in the interests of the working class, fight for its implementation, win mass support for it, and be prepared, if necessary, to be defeated on it in the House and go with it before the electorate at a fresh General Election. It stood for a government with a "bold policy to appeal to the workers all over the country".⁴ The Party deplored the composition of the Government with its Liberal and Tory Lords and exclusion of Labour militants.⁵

On February 8, 1924, the Political Bureau of the Party issued a "Call to All Workers, to all Trade Unions, Trades Councils and Local Labour Parties"⁶ in which the warning was expressed still more strongly:

"The inclusion of Liberal and Conservative Ministers has created an uneasy feeling amongst the most active of Labour's supporters. Why have these men been taken into Labour's inner councils, while tried and trusted fighters like Lansbury and Smillie are kept outside? . . . It is felt that the leaders of Labour, in forming the Cabinet, have made grave concessions to the enemies of Labour. . . ."

The "Call" acknowledged that there had been a definite weakness

¹ Maurice, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 151.

² Mowat, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-174.

³ John Paton, *Left Turn*, pp. 168-169.

⁴ *Workers' Weekly*, January 4, 1924. Editorial "The Need Now".

⁵ *Ibid.*, February 1, 1924. "Choice for Labour Government".

⁶ *Ibid.*, February 8, 1924.

in the action of the Communists and Labour militants since the General Election, a tendency to "wait and see", to passivity, to try to avoid "embarrassing" the Labour leaders, to remain "quiescent", leaving the field of pressure wide open to reaction. It was high time for the militants to move into action, particularly on burning issues like unemployment, housing, and the nationalisation of the mines:

"There is going to be a mighty struggle between the working-class movement and the organised employing class for determining control of the Labour Government. We must not be deterred by the plea that the forcing of these issues will mean the defeat of the Labour Government. Defeated on any of them, it could turn to the movement, and through it, make an appeal that would rouse the workers from one end of the country to the other. . . ."¹

The warning was sounded once again, and still more emphatically, at the end of February 1924, in a joint statement of the Executive Committee of the C.P.G.B. and the E.C. of the Communist International—*The Communist International on the Labour Government*.²

Communists, the statement explained, had never concealed their view that real and lasting gains for the workers and the building of socialism could only be achieved when political power had been taken into the hands of the working class. They had never ceased to warn against the role of the right-wing reformist leaders of Britain and of the Second International. But they made a clear distinction between the reformist leaders and those masses of workers who sincerely believed in the promises of the Labour Party, and who had voted Labour at the General Election hoping for real measures against unemployment, taxation, trade with Soviet Russia, opposition to armaments and to colonial oppression:

"The British Communist Party will support the Labour Government in all its efforts to improve the position of the working class and to lessen the peril of armaments and war."

But,

"at the same time we tell you quite openly: The Labour Government, to retain Liberal support will recede, step by step, from its

¹ Ibid. See also R. Palme Dutt, "The Labour Government: Where We Stand" in the same issue of *Workers' Weekly*.

² *Workers' Weekly*, February 22, 1924. See also Resolution of the Communist International on "The Labour Government and the Tasks of the C.P.G.B.", reprinted in *Workers' Weekly*, February 29, 1924.

promises, unless you bring pressure to bear on it, and unless you make it understood that every concession to the Liberals means rupture with you."

The statement proposed the furthering of united struggle to press the Labour Government into action on such issues as the maintenance of the unemployed at trade union rates, the nationalisation of the mines and railways, the granting of full freedom to Ireland, India and Egypt, the reduction of armaments, the granting of credits to Soviet Russia, and the scrapping of the Treaty of Versailles. "We call upon you," the statement concluded, "to close the ranks of the working class, to establish a united front of labour and struggle."

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND THE INDUSTRIAL STRUGGLE

By January 1924 the industrial movement was stirring. It was not only that in most of the key trades the workers were chafing against the wage-cuts and losses of privilege suffered with the onset of the post-war slump and the great capitalist offensive of 1921-1923.

There was a feeling of counter-offensive amongst the workers following the period of extreme depression and defeat. The Communist Party was in the thick of it. Its own reorganisation had reinvigorated the Party, turned it outwards, it was beginning to grow in size and influence, and become a centre of resistance against the employers' attack and of new left and militant currents in British trade unions. In the early months the Minority Movement, first locally, then nationally, began to emerge within the unions, under Communist Party initiative, rallying the left in opposition to the right-wing leadership.

Moreover, now the workers were hopeful. They had, for the first time, a Labour Government in Britain, they looked to that Government to help them in their struggle to end enforced "Agreements" and improve their wage position. Bourgeois tactics were clear. By the traditional double process of flattery and threat the Government was to be led to oppose the industrial movement and, simultaneously, to protect capital and discredit Labour.

How would the Government act? The first test was not long to be awaited.

January Rail Strike and the Southampton Shipyards

A railway strike was, in fact, pending at the moment when the Labour

Government was formed and broke out in its first days of office.

The issue was an award made by the National Wages Board which imposed wage reductions and unfavourable adjustments in conditions, especially at the expense of the locomotive-men,¹ and involving cuts of 11s. to 22s. 6d. per week for drivers, and 9s. to 18s. for firemen.² The struggle was complicated by the fact that the small craft union the A.S.L.E.F., led by Bromley, and which organised the bulk of the locomen, had balloted the award, rejected it, and were prepared to strike; whilst the N.U.R., the general union, but which also included a minority of locomen, under the leadership of the extreme right-wing J. H. Thomas and Cramp, declared for acceptance of the award and not only opposed the strike but were quite prepared to break it by ordering their locomen to continue work.³ The National Wages Board had been established in 1921 under Lloyd George, and despite its formal equal representation of employers and labour, the so-called "neutral" chairman (in this case Sir William Mackenzie, a wealthy lawyer) guaranteed its support, in the last analysis, for the interests of capital. The ruling class with the support of the most extreme right-wingers of the Thomas variety, were pressing for forms of compulsory arbitration for certain industries including the railways, and the struggle therefore ranged around this issue as well as the specific problem of wages.

On January 20—the eve of the strike—Bromley, in an interview with the *Workers' Weekly*⁴ explained:

"... we are fighting for a big principle; we are fighting against compulsory arbitration. But there is a bigger principle than that.

"It is time to stop the rot! Wages have been falling continually in all industry. There are many of our members who feel that it is their duty and their honour to stand out against the everlasting downward slide back to the misery and degradation of the old days."

Much depended on the attitude of the Labour Party, I.L.P., and above all, the Labour Government. The Labour Party and I.L.P. leaders, far from showing their solidarity with the strikers, tended to deplore the strike as a blow at the Labour Government. H. N. Brailsford, for instance, wrote in the *New Leader* at the beginning of

¹ Allen Hutt, *Post-War History of the British Working Class*, p. 83.

² *Workers' Weekly*, January 11, 1924, "Railwaymen! All Together".

³ *Ibid.*, January 4, January 11, 1924, and J. T. Murphy, "Labour Struggles in Britain", in *International Press Correspondence* (Inprecorr), Vol. 4, No. 8, 1924, pp. 49–50.

⁴ *Workers' Weekly*, January 25, 1924.

February¹ that the strike, if it should take place, would "deal the Labour Party in public opinion, a blow which no Rothermere or Beaverbrook could have inflicted".

The Communist Party campaigned along three main lines—first, to unite all railwaymen and all rail unions to support the strike; secondly, to win the maximum solidarity of other industrial workers, particularly road transport, and to press the General Council of the T.U.C. into action in support of the locomen; and thirdly, to push the Government itself to throw its weight on the side of the strike.²

"The issue raised by the railway strike is of very immediate importance. For it raises the whole question of the relation of the Labour Government to the working class. The whole calculation of the bourgeoisie is by mingled suggestion, intimidation, adulation, cajolery and tactics to drive the Labour Government into a position of national patriotism and opposition to the working class . . . The way (forward) is for the Labour Government to proclaim itself and act as the weapon of the working class against the bourgeoisie, and not the buffer of the bourgeoisie against the working class."³

The Government in fact made clear its opposition to the strike, and with its help and that of the reformist leaders of the N.U.R. the issue was speedily settled to the advantage of the employers.

February—The Dockers

The next test of the Labour Government was the strike of the dockers. The forerunner of this strike was the unofficial strike of July 1923. On December 15, 1923, the T.G.W.U. put in a claim for 2s. a day increase for the dockers and a guaranteed week for casual workers.⁴ The employers considered their claim on the following day and dismissed it in less than an hour. The unions tendered strike notices and at an ensuing conference Bevin demonstrated that the profits of the shipping firms and port employers in 1923 amounted to £38 million compared to the increases demanded which would cost them around £2 million. Ministry of Labour intervention at this stage proved ineffective and the strike was called for February 16, 1924.⁵ The

¹ Quoted in *Workers' Weekly*, February 8, 1924, "The I.L.P. and the Railway Strike".

² *Workers' Weekly*, January 4, January 11, 18, 25, February 8, 22, 1924.

³ R. Palme Dutt in "Notes of the Month", *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1924.

⁴ "The Story of the Strike", in the *Workers' Weekly*, February 22, 1924.

⁵ George Hardy, "Dockers Struggle and Strike" in the *Workers' Weekly*, February 15, 1924.

employers had hoped that the organisational division of the dockers between the T.G.W.U. and the "Blue Union", that had arisen the previous year, would prevent, or at least weaken strike action. But the two unions made common cause on the strike despite differences of tactics and demands.

The Communist Party already had a considerable influence in the docks, and issued a call for dockers' unity and solidarity with the strikers.¹ It offered all assistance to the T.G.W.U., and put its best speakers and its local premises at the disposal of the local strike committees.² It pressed the Blue Union to work together with and to synchronise its tactics and demands with the T.G.W.U.³

But once again the Labour Government, with all its authority, moved into action—against the dockers. At the very outset of the strike MacDonald declared that the Government would take all steps to secure the transport of foods and supplies and to do so "has already set up the nucleus of the organisation".⁴ The organisation referred to was more sinister than a mere food transport committee. Though this was disguised at the time, it was in fact nothing but the old apparatus of the Emergency Powers Act put on the statute book by Lloyd George at the time of the miners' strike of autumn 1920. Col. Wedgwood (Chancellor, Duchy of Lancaster—that office which covers a multitude of sins), was appointed Chief Commissioner and it was leaked that troops and bluejackets would be called in to unload food supplies. The attitude of the Government was perhaps best summed up by Philip Snowden:⁵

"... there was a wide public impression that they [the strikes] had been entered upon in the expectation that the Labour Government would give the strikers their support. There was, of course, no justification for such an impression. The Government, in every case, adopted an attitude of strict impartiality. It made great efforts within its legal powers to bring the disputes to an end by negotiation."

¹ "To All Workers", joint statement of the C.P.G.B. and British Bureau of R.I.L.U. in the *Workers' Weekly*, February 22, 1924, and also statement of Political Bureau, "The Party and the Dock Strike", in the same issue.

² *Workers' Weekly*, February 22, 1924, statement of Political Bureau.

³ "The Future of the 'Blue' Union", in *Workers' Weekly*, February 29, 1924.

⁴ Quoted in Editorial, "The Labour Government and Strikes", in *Workers' Weekly*, February 29, 1924. See also Philip, Viscount Snowden, *An Autobiography*, Vol. II, p. 634.

⁵ Snowden, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 633.

Strict impartiality! The Government was as impartial as the proverbial neutral Chairman of an Arbitration Committee. If that impossible phenomenon, a neutral government, could exist, it would bring in the troops on Monday to scab on the dockers, and on Tuesday despatch them to swell the picket line. The Government acted *on one side only* as all previous capitalist governments had acted in the case of industrial conflicts, to bring the strike to an end in the interests of the employers. To this they added the blackmail that the strike was damaging to Labour interests, combining moral pressure with the threat of troops, sailors and Emergency Powers Act, and causing Mr. Bevin to declare:

“The Union had in mind in the latter stages of the negotiations the earnest appeal of the Prime Minister to make a just peace and an honourable settlement. I wish it had been a Tory government in office. We would not have been frightened by their threats.”¹

The double pressure had the intended effect. The Ministry of Labour set up a Court of Enquiry; a part of the demands were, under the heavy pressure of the united dockers, granted, but the vital issue of casual labour was postponed.

An unofficial strike of Southampton shipyard workers broke out in mid-February, 1924.² Over a considerable period the local wages of this section of workers had been some 10s. to 17s. below that of the rest of the country. There had been, meanwhile, a series of long and abortive conferences on wages through the official machinery of the union. The strike gained in impetus in the local shipyards and remained solid right through March and well into April. Solidarity was considerable and the A.E.U. Strike Committee was receiving around £300 weekly in collections, donations, etc., with the Communist Party playing a big role in the campaign. Both Pollitt and Gallacher as well as a number of Labour M.P.s visited Southampton to rally support for the strike. But after eight weeks' struggle the strike collapsed,³ broken by a united front of the employers and right-wing leaders in the engineers' union. Once again the existence of the Labour Government proved no more helpful to or sympathetic with the strikers than that provided by previous Conservative and Coalition Governments.

¹ Quoted in *Workers' Weekly*, April 4, 1924.

² *Ibid.*, March 7, March 21, April 4, 1924.

³ *Ibid.*, April 25, 1924.

March–April London Traffic Strike and the Wembley Exhibition

Perhaps most indicative of the attitude of the Labour Government was the London traffic strike that opened out in March. The London tramwaymen struck on March 21 demanding an 8s. increase and an eight-hour day. They were quickly joined by the busmen, and the Underground workers threatened to join them, bringing the whole of London's traffic to a standstill.¹ A Court of Enquiry produced, on March 24, an Interim Report, essentially accepting the justice of the wage claims ("not seriously questioned"),² but declaring that the industry could not afford to meet them. On March 26 it was announced that the Tube workers would within two days join the strike.

Once again and without delay the Government rushed in all the paraphernalia of the E.P.A., with a Cabinet Committee under Col. Wedgwood considering the use of armed forces to operate transport and thus break the strike. The full story is told in an article by Sydney Webb on *The First Labour Government*, written after the Labour Government's defeat and only published at the beginning of 1961.³

"We were soon confronted with a most serious stoppage of the means of transport in London, which created widespread public inconvenience and threatened, by its extension to all the railway workers, to stop all the railways throughout the kingdom, and by a strike of electrical workers to throw London into darkness and to cut off the current for the electric railways. Without hesitation, and without a dissentient voice, the Cabinet set up again the emergency organisation which had been sketched out in 1919–20; put a subordinate Minister in charge of each geographical province; had a Committee under Wedgwood sitting daily at the Home Office to organise emergency supplies of food and transport, and sent two Ministers down to Knowsley, where the King happened to be, in order to get signed immediately a proclamation putting in force the E.P.A., which made the Executive supreme; and actually arranged with Lord Chelmsford to bring out 800 naval stokers to keep the power stations going (as it was afterwards discovered going even beyond the law in giving him a Cabinet order to do this

¹ Ibid., March 14, March 28, 1924, and also Harry Pollitt, "Lessons of the Tram Strike", in *Workers' Weekly*, April 4, 1924.

² Quoted in Richard W. Lyman, op. cit., p. 219.

³ Sydney Webb, "The First Labour Government", in *Political Quarterly*, January–March 1961, p. 23.

merely for a civil purpose unconnected with the Navy or any government service)."

The E.P.A. was in fact in force for a number of days without the working class being informed. In the meantime a joint committee of the General Council of the T.U.C. and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party published a resolution deploring the possible use of it and urging that, instead, the Government should use its powers to "take over the whole of the London traffic services, paying the wages and observing the conditions demanded until such time as a Committee, to be immediately set up, has reported as to the best method for permanently settling the traffic problem".

The Communist Party despatched a circular on the traffic strike to all its Districts and local Party organisations on March 28¹ warning of the (then still secret) measures that the Government was taking and the danger that such an attitude of the Labour Government could only lead to a splitting and weakening of the working-class movement. The Party called for meetings and demonstrations in solidarity with the traffic workers, for the popularisation of the T.U.C.-Labour Party resolution, and for a maximum effort to force the Government back into a position of support for the strikers. The influence of the Party was sufficiently large to play a decisive role in changing this position, and on March 27, a conference was opened by MacDonald, continued through the night, reaching the next day a settlement that in a number of ways met the demands of the strikers.

An unofficial strike of building workers on the site of the Empire Exhibition at Wembley afforded another example of the abject surrender of the Labour Government to the forces of capitalism (and the Crown). An Empire Exhibition was under preparation—an important prestige-event for British imperialism. The National Building Employers had refused the demands of the trade for an increase of 2*d.* an hour. At 5 p.m. on the last day of March many of the building workers on the site came out to enforce their demand for the 2*d.*, and on April 1, after mass picketing, the whole site came to a standstill.²

The Wembley stoppage was regarded as much more than a local wage struggle. It was a challenge to this whole empire-boasting project and there were cries of anger and outrage from the capitalist press and from the powers-that-be. J. R. Clynes recounts:³

¹ See full text in Appendix III to this chapter.

² *Workers' Weekly*, April 4, 1924.

³ The Rt. Hon. J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, p. 54.

"King George had set his heart on the Exhibition being a success and made many important personal suggestions which were eventually incorporated in its gigantic design.

"A month or two before the opening date, he grew very disturbed at the reports which stated that overseas visitors would find muddy lanes and a vista of waste material awaiting them, owing to the work of preparation having fallen behind schedule. When in April, over 7,000 workmen at Wembley began a strike, J. H. Thomas, who as Colonial Secretary had much to do with this great Empire trade show, reported to us that His Majesty was in despair."

Mr. Clynes continued:

"After some talk we met with the men, and told their leaders of the King's feelings; and in the end patriotism prevailed, thus adding another example to the many where Royal intervention, direct or indirect, has saved a difficult situation.

"Wembley was opened on the advertised date by the King. One of my duties as Lord Privy Seal, was to attend him at the opening ceremony, and as I stood by his side I could detect the thankfulness in his voice that things had eventually come right."

In his obsequious satisfaction, the Lord Privy Seal somewhat adjusts the circumstances in which the strike was brought to an end and in which "patriotism prevailed". This was achieved in fact by a united front of right-wing builders' leaders who refused to recognise the strike,¹ the Government whose leaders deplored it (Tom Shaw, Minister of Labour, declared in the House of Commons: "The dispute is, in every sense a regrettable one. All the machinery of the Ministry of Labour, and I think all the power of the Government will be exercised towards bringing it to as speedy a conclusion as possible"),² the capitalist press which went all out to slander the strike leaders, particularly Bob Lovell, Vice-Chairman of Willesden Labour Party and a member of the Communist Party, and the 500 foot and mounted police who were drafted to the Exhibition site to protect blackleg labour.

¹ See Bert Williams, *op. cit.* Also from discussions with Frank Jackson, Librarian of C.P.G.B., who remembers the despatch of union delegates to Wembley to persuade the men to return to work, and the enforced acquaintance of one of these delegates with the magnificent lake that was being constructed in the heart of the Exhibition.

² Quoted in Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

May-June, Miners and Railway Shop-men

A new crisis in the mining industry already began to loom up at the outset of 1924. The 1921 Agreement, into which the defeated miners had been forced, had fulfilled their worst fears.¹ In January they rejected by ballot a renewal of the terms of the old Agreement.² The Executive of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain had become by this time more militant in outlook.

Early in 1924 A. J. Cook had been elected Secretary of the Miners' Federation, and one of the main factors in his victory had certainly been the support given to his candidature by the Communist Party. The Party, recognising Cook as an outstanding militant, had backed him in the South Wales ballot against W. J. Mainwaring, who was at that time a member of the Communist Party.³ Cook's leadership helped to make the Miners' Federation one of the most class-conscious and combative forces of the trade union movement.

The miners' came out in support of a programme along the lines proposed by the Miners' Minority Movement.⁴ But once again the Government intervened, averted the call for the strike by vague promises of a minimum wage bill that never materialised, and used their influence to secure an uneasy majority for a settlement by 473,000 votes to 311,000 in face of strong opposition from the Scottish, South Wales and Lancashire coalfields, where at this period Communist and militant influence was strongest.

At the end of March the N.U.R. National Shop Workers' Council drew up a programme demanding a 10s. increase in wages, a week's holiday with pay and a guaranteed day and week. The Council having no power to act, the claim was forwarded to the N.U.R. Executive who took no effective action. On May 17 it was decided at a Bristol Conference to strike in favour of the programme plus a minimum of £3 per week. The companies refused to negotiate and the N.U.R. Executive repudiated the strike as unconstitutional. On June 3 the strike began. Shop workers and N.U.R. men in the power stations

¹ A. J. Cook, "The Crisis in the Mining Industry", in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, April 1924.

² *Ibid.* and *Workers' Weekly*, January 18, 1924.

³ The issue of Party support was hotly debated in the Party, and opinion was divided. Eventually it was agreed to support Cook, as the more effective militant representative, although Mainwaring was a member of the Party and Cook not. In the South Wales ballot Cook received 50,123 votes against Mainwaring's 49,617. In the national ballot he beat J. Jones of Yorks, the next in the ballot, by 217,664 to 202,297.

⁴ *Workers' Weekly*, May 9, 1924.

came out in London and many stations on the Great Western Line, reinforced later by a number of London traffic men and shop-men from other centres.

On June 5 another dispute developed. The London District Committees of various craft unions had demanded an advance of 12s. per week for members employed on the London shops. The E.T.U. called out their men who were joined by other craftsmen, although the A.E.U. refused to recognise the strike.¹ This was a separate dispute, but timed to coincide with the strike of the N.U.R. men.

The Communist Party called:

“force the Unions to recognise your strike . . . refuse to blackleg on the strikers . . . rally to the support of the railway shop-men and help secure a real victory.”²

But, once again, the Government intervened on the side of Thomas and Cramp. The Minister of Labour, Tom Shaw declared:

“. . . we had no sympathy with this unofficial strike . . . all the resources of the Government would be used to prevent the four essential services . . . from being stopped.”³

Mr. Clynes boasted in the House of Commons that they had:

“played the part of a National Government, and not a class Government. . . . I am certain that any Government, whatever it might be, could not in the circumstances have done more than we have done to safeguard the public interests.”⁴

Once again the unholy alliance of Government, right-wing trade union leaders, traffic combine and capitalist press brought the strike to defeat. It is notable that the British Fascists also entered the arena with promises of protection for the strike-breakers and canteens to feed them.⁵

August–September: Builders’ Strike

This almost monotonous record of defeat and retreat continued throughout July into August and September with the builders’ lock-out.

¹ *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, July 1, 1924, pp. 155–156, and *Workers’ Weekly*, June 13, 1924.

² *Workers’ Weekly*, June 13, 1924.

³ Quoted in Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

The builders' claim for a national advance of 2d. per hour for all grades was heard in January 1924.¹ After inconclusive negotiations in May the builders rejected by ballot vote (104,001 to 13,462) the employers' offer of ½d. and voted for strike action (94,735 to 34,619).² A new ballot was organised on a slightly improved offer and accepted by a small majority, but meanwhile a strike of Liverpool builders broke out and the Master Builders' Federation threatened a general lock-out for July 5 unless they returned to work.³ The National Federation of Building Trades Operatives (N.F.B.T.O.) accepted the challenge and issued strike notices for July 5.⁴ The strike was at first remarkably solid⁵ and finally a temporary settlement was reached on August 22,⁶ far short of the basic 2d. per hour demand. The Ministry of Labour was active throughout the dispute with its usual "benevolent neutrality" in favour of the employers. Mr. Clynes, asked to address a meeting of building workers in August, declared:

"that an understanding had been arrived at by the members of the Government that its trade union members would keep to politics only and not take sides, in industrial disputes."⁷

Lessons of the Industrial Struggles

Railwaymen, shipyard workers, dockers, London traffic workers, workers at Wembley, miners, builders—a succession of defeats or unsatisfactory settlements brought about by the unity of employers, capitalist press and right-wing Labour supported by the Labour Government!

It was a dismal and devastating record.

The year had opened with signs of reviving militancy, of preparation of the mass of industrial workers to take a firmer stand against enforced agreements, wage-cuts, and the conditions brought about in the three preceding years of defeat and retreat. Everything pointed to the fact that the rank and file were ready for a counter-offensive to improve their lot. They were full of hope. It seemed to them at the outset that

¹ *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, January 1924, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, June 1924, p. 129, and *Workers' Weekly*, May 9, 1924.

³ *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, July 1924, p. 158, and *Workers' Weekly*, June 27, 1924.

⁴ *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, August 1924, pp. 171-172.

⁵ *Ibid.* and *Workers' Weekly*, "Interview with Mr. Coppock", July 25, 1924.

⁶ *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, September 1924, p. 190, and *Workers' Weekly*, August 29, 1924.

⁷ Quoted in Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

they now had a Government of their own people who would use their powers and positions to support the struggle of Labour. What else, indeed, did a Labour Government mean?

But the result was this succession of defeats. The employers' activities, the outcries of the press, the betrayal by right-wing trade union leaders—this was nothing new. But what *was* new was that the workers, for the first time in Britain, saw Social Democracy in office. They saw a Labour Government denouncing their strikes, demanding that they return to work, supporting the employers on committee after committee, enquiry after enquiry, threatening them with use of troops and blacklegs, invoking and even using the infamous E.P.A.

The Labour Government, writes the American historian Lyman,¹ did not "bring much change in techniques for dealing with strikes". The 1925 T.U.C. reflected considerable feeling "that the Labour Party does not, or at any rate, did not during its term of office, sufficiently represent the unions."² Sydney Webb (and no one could be more fully informed) quite unnecessarily finds it necessary to deny that the Labour Government at any time suffered from improper influence of "the extremists" or "the left" (who in his senses would ever have affirmed this?) and sums up their whole attitude:³

"Whether in Labour disputes involving grave public consequences, or in cases of mob disorder or with regard to the constant agitation of the Communist Party, or in relation to threatened rebelliousness among the 'Clyde Group' or those whom Lansbury influenced on the London Labour Party under Herbert Morrison, the Cabinet never flinched and never hesitated in taking the action that the situation seemed to demand at whatever risk of unpopularity."

Of course this *could* be explained to a degree by the supreme cunning of British capitalism that put the Labour Government there in order to discredit it, and never failed to apply the perfidious double weapon of combined flattery and threat. *But the real reason was deeper*: it lay in the essence of the reformist outlook, the reformist approach. The reformist leaders like MacDonald, Snowden, Thomas, Clynes, rejected the class struggle and supported class conciliation. They made no bones of it. In the preface to the 1924 edition of his *Socialism: Critical and Constructive*, MacDonald wrote:

¹ Richard W. Lyman, op. cit., p. 222.

² *Forward*, September 12, 1925.

³ Sydney Webb, "The First Labour Government" in the *Political Quarterly*, January-March 1961, pp. 22-23.

"It cannot be over-emphasised that public doles, Poplarism, strikes for increased wages, limitations of output, not only are not Socialism but may mislead the spirit and the policy of the Socialist movement."¹

Thomas wrote:

"For as long as I can remember I never disguised my antipathy to class warfare, holding that I have seen good and bad in all sections of the community and that, in the end, mere class conflict must inevitably lead to disaster. Constantly I urged these views on the railwaymen, and, at a banquet soon after my appointment as Dominions Secretary, I again gave utterance to them."²

Moreover, in so far as they verbally stood for a socialist objective, they aimed at socialism through a series of gradual parliamentary and local reforms *within the framework of capitalism and the capitalist state and within the imperialist empire with all its trappings.*

They set out to make capitalism work, and when faced with any real militant opposition to capitalism, with anything that might hinder the working of capitalism, it was the militants and not the capitalists who for them became "the enemy", the target for their abuse, their attack, their action.

Thus it was that, in this period with a Labour Government, in the industrial field "the enemy" was not the employers, the great trusts, the owners' federations, etc., but the militants, rank and file trade union leaders, left wingers in the Labour Party and Independent Labour Party branches and, above all, the Communist Party, which as we have seen, despite its small size, gave continuous leadership on all these immediate actions, teaching unity, militancy, solidarity, the strengthening of the unions, resistance to the capitalist offensive, and fight for real improvement in the living standards of the working class.

Step by step, month by month, the Government slid down the slippery slope of class conciliation, became more and more entangled in and subordinated to the permanent machinery of the capitalist state. True it is that the more the Labour Government surrendered the more it was attacked in the capitalist press as "an instrument of Moscow", but this was an essential part of the exercise.

¹ Preface to 1924 reprint of *Socialism: Critical and Constructive*.

² J. H. Thomas, *My Story*, 1937, pp. 88-89.

Inevitably, as month followed month, and betrayal followed betrayal, disillusion grew in the minds of the working class.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYED STRUGGLES

Unemployment had been one of the main issues of the 1923 General Election, and the hope of serious struggle to reduce it and to alleviate the hardship of the unemployed was one of the principal reasons for the increased Labour vote and the return of a Labour Government. Nor had the Labour Party and the I.L.P. been modest in their promises. The "first object of socialist policy" stated the I.L.P. *Socialist Programme*:¹

"would be to secure a more equal distribution of wealth so that the demand for goods would be increased and stabilised."

"The Labour Party alone has a positive remedy for unemployment", proclaimed the Labour Party Manifesto. To this end they had pledged themselves to such measures as the enforcement of a living wage in every industry, payment of adequate allowances to the unemployed, taxation of luxury incomes, progressive socialisation of industry, elimination of the idle rich, the steady withdrawal of juvenile labour in industry, reduction of working hours to 44, the drastic regulation of overtime. The I.L.P. *Programme* and Labour Party manifesto were rich in pledges and promises.

To make promises was easy; but to have implemented them would have meant a strong and united onslaught on the interests of capital, risking a defeat in the House, a defeat which, on such issues, would have immensely increased working-class support for the Labour Party. In fact, apart from some quick measures on the issue of benefits, no basic steps were taken whatever to strike at the roots of unemployment.

Already before the meeting of Parliament, John Wheatley, as Minister of Health, had rescinded an order of Sir Alfred Mond, issued in 1921, but never enforced, placing restrictions on the quantity of relief in the Borough of Poplar.² A one-clause Bill was quickly passed, without substantial opposition, ending the notorious "gap" (i.e. a

¹ I.L.P., *Socialist Programme*, pp. 10-11.

² Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, chapter 9, "Unemployment".

three-week period after 12 weeks of uncovenanted¹ benefit during which benefits had been withheld as a "deterrent to idleness").²

From these immediate measures the Minister turned to the passage of a more important Bill amending the Insurance Act,³ which increased the benefit scale from 15s. to 18s. for an adult male, from 12s. to 15s. for adult women, and the allowance for dependent children from 1s. to 2s. The Bill which became operative in August 1924, was a definite step forward, but it included a new (dis)qualification, the notorious "not genuinely seeking work" clause, on the basis of which in subsequent years so many were to be disallowed from benefit and left to near-starvation.

If there was a slight improvement on the issue of benefits, on the more fundamental issue of measures to reduce unemployment progress was slower than a snail and less than negligible. It augured ill from the beginning. MacDonald's first statement of Government policy in the House on February 12, 1924, seemed in respect of unemployment aimed chiefly at allaying the "fear of socialist extravagance".⁴

The first measure aimed at providing work was an extension of the earlier Trade Facilities Act under which the Government undertook to guarantee loans to British firms for various purposes, and the chief change proposed was to increase the maximum permitted total of such guarantees from £50 million to £65 million in order to cover a loan to a cotton-growing syndicate in the Sudan. The Government carried the second reading of the Bill by 297 to 43 (30 of the 43 opposing were Labour supporters).⁵ The total measures operated for providing work were so slow and negligible that month by month discontent grew amongst the workers and mockery in the Tory press. On March 10, 1924, jeered at by critics in the House who observed that all the schemes proposed to date by the Government to alleviate unemployment had been put forward by previous governments, the Minister of Labour, Tom Shaw, replied with the famous words:

"Yes, they have been agreed to by the previous Governments. Does anybody think that we can produce schemes like rabbits out of our hats?"⁶

¹ "Uncovenanted", i.e. not covered by payments of premiums.

² Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, chapter 9.

³ Richard W. Lyman, *ibid.*, and Wal Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles, 1919-1936*, p. 128.

⁴ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁵ Debates on Trades Facilities Amendments Bill, 69, 70.

⁶ 170 *H.C. Debates*, 5. S. 2,003.

Disillusionment spread in the ranks of the Labour Party. The *New Leader* wrote in May:

"It is no secret that the whole Party is deeply anxious over the delay in undertaking or even announcing anything much beyond the schemes which the late Government had set in motion."¹

And in the same month the Prime Minister declared his impotence in the House of Commons:

"Until you have been in office, until you have seen those files warning Cabinet Ministers of the dangers of legislation, or that sort of thing, you have not had the experience of trying to carry out what seems to be a simple thing, but which becomes a complex, and exceeding difficult, and a laborious and almost heartbreaking thing, when you come to be a member of a Cabinet in a responsible Government."²

The growing discontent was reflected in the activities of the militant movement of unemployed workers led by the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (N.U.W.C.M.).

It had been agreed at the Plymouth T.U.C. in 1923 that a Joint Advisory Council on Unemployment should be established by the General Council and the N.U.W.C.M. In February 1924, this Joint Council elaborated a six-point Unemployed Charter³—work or effective maintenance; the Government to provide national schemes to absorb unemployment; all unemployment relief to be completely dissociated from the Poor Law; reduction in the hours of labour; provision of Occupation Centres of Training for the unemployed; and the provision of suitable housing at rents within the means of the workers.

All sections of the labour movement were called upon to campaign around the Charter, culminating in a "Week of Agitation" at the end of May and the beginning of June 1924.⁴ In London the Week was inaugurated by a demonstration of 5,000 at Tower Hill on May 26, followed on June 1 by one of the largest demonstrations ever held in Trafalgar Square. "In almost every town tens of thousands of employed and unemployed workers marched together".⁵

¹ *New Leader*, May 23, 1924.

² 174 *H.C. Debates*, 5. S. 651.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, February 15 and February 29, 1924. Also W. Hannington, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-127.

⁴ *Workers' Weekly*, May 30, 1924.

⁵ W. Hannington, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

That there was little to choose between the attitude of the Labour and that of previous governments to the struggles of the unemployed, was revealed by the case of Harry Homer, a London organiser of the N.U.W.C.M.¹ Homer, when unemployed, was ordered by the Deptford Board of Guardians to do engineering work for his relief. As a skilled engineer he refused to undertake work that could be done by an employed worker at trade union rates and which would have gone, in any case, against the rules of his union. Early in February the Board of Guardians had his home searched and found, in a cupboard, two loaves of bread and a small portion of margarine, upon which he was sentenced to imprisonment for "drawing relief under false pretences" with a further sentence for refusing work that had formerly been done by an *employed* trade unionist. Henderson refused to intervene on his behalf, or to receive an unemployed deputation on the issue, on the grounds that "he did not receive deputations in regard to criminal offences".

Thus the small improvement granted in the form of improved benefits was more than offset by the absolute absence of any serious step to reduce unemployment, the complete refusal to apply the measures to which the Government was pledged in its electoral programme, and by its callous attitude to the struggle of the unemployed workers themselves. At the General Election of October 1923, there were in Britain some 1,347,857 registered unemployed, or 11.7 per cent of those in insured industries.² In October 1924, when the Labour Government fell, the official figure was 1,280,681³ or 11.1 per cent of those in insured industries,⁴ with no improvement in sight. It is not surprising that it was this issue as much as any other that spread disillusion with reformist practice.

Housing

A similar gap, though perhaps not so glaring, between pledge and practice was revealed in the Labour Government's housing policy, though it was in this field more than any other that something at least *was* accomplished in the interests of the working class.⁵ The I.L.P.

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, April 11, 1924. Also Bert Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

² *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, January 1924.

³ *18th Abstract of Labour Statistics*, Cmd. 2740, p. 53.

⁴ *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, December 1924.

⁵ For the details of the Labour Government's housing policy see Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, chapter 8, "Housing".

Socialist Programme had promised drastic measures.¹ The Labour Party's Election Manifesto had pledged that the Labour Government would "abolish the slums, promptly build an adequate supply of decent homes, and resist decontrol till the shortage is satisfied".

In the debate censuring Baldwin's Government, MacDonald had cited housing along with unemployment as the two essential issues facing the new parliament. John Wheatley, the Clydesider, and most militant of the new Cabinet, was appointed Minister of Health, with Arthur Greenwood as his Parliamentary Secretary. After meeting representatives of the building employers and workers, Wheatley put forward early in June the financial resolution for a new Housing Bill,² supplemented by a Bill on building materials,³ to stop price racketeering and restriction of supply of materials. A subsidy of £9 per year for 30 years was proposed for houses meeting certain specifications, i.e. rented to tenants who would live in them; no sub-letting without the agreement of the Local Authority; not to be sold without the permission of the Ministry of Health (or the equivalent Scottish Board); a fair wages clause in the construction contract; rents based on pre-war working-class houses in the same areas. Despite Tory opposition the Bill was passed, receiving Royal Assent on August 7, 1924. Unfortunately, this measure, which was the most positive single measure enacted under the Labour Government, was to show its benefits in the main *after* the Government's fall.⁴

In marked contrast to the definitely progressive measures involved in the Wheatley Housing Bill was the complete absence of action taken by the Government in relation to evictions.⁵ Figures showed that in England and Wales 35,001 actions for possession were entered in the courts between the passage of the Rent Restriction Acts of August 1, 1923, and March 31, 1924. Of these 21,326 resulted in Orders for Possession, and 3,835 actual Warrants. In Scotland the position was still worse.

At the end of February 1924, a Labour M.P., Benjamin Gardner, introduced a Private Member's Bill to replace Chamberlain's 1923 Rent Restrictions Act, which would have reduced the grounds for

¹ I.L.P., *Socialist Programme*, p. 6.

² *Housing (Financial Provisions) Memorandum*, Cmd. 2151, 1924.

³ Building Materials (Changes and Supply) Bill.

⁴ 521,700 houses had been built under the Wheatley Act before its abolition in 1933. See Mowat, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁵ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-129, and *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, June 1924, p. 119.

eviction to the desire of the owner to live in the house himself, and, even then, the onus would be on him to provide alternative accommodation. The Bill would also have abolished tied cottages, reduced the permitted rent increases over pre-war level from 40 per cent (including repairs allowance) to 25 per cent, and brought back control over all housing decontrolled since 1920. With the full opposition of the Tories and the equivocation of the Liberals, the Bill got stuck in Committee.

Under pressure from the Clydesiders, militant trade unionists, N.U.W.C.M. and Communist Party, the Government finally brought in a Bill of its own, much weaker than that of Gardner, but in face of Tory and Liberal criticism it retreated step by step and the Bill was first whittled down to nothing, and then defeated.

The Budget

All the budgetary promises of the election manifesto—capital levy on fortunes over £5,000 to reduce the National Debt; reform of income tax; direct taxation of land values; heavy increase in death duties—were conspicuous by their absence from the Labour Government's budget which Mr. Snowden boasted was "vindictive against no class and against no interest".¹

Certainly no one could claim that Mr. Snowden's budget showed any sign of vindictiveness towards capital. Army, Navy and Air Force Estimates were all up compared with expenditure the previous year. Estimates for both elementary and higher education were down. With regard to taxation, the budget, it is true, reduced the cost of, as it was called, "the poor man's breakfast" (reduction of duty on tea, coffee, sugar), but balanced this minor concession with the repeal of the Corporation Profits Tax and the Inhabited House Duty (the waiving of which at that period benefited the middle and upper classes) and the ending of the McKenna Duties (mainly on luxuries).

Sir Robert Horne, in the budget debate in the Commons, expressed his satisfaction:²

"The Budget statement today with some slight modifications might well have been the Budget of either of the old Parties."¹

And Lord Asquith echoed:³ "The Budget proceeds on thoroughly

¹ Hansard, 1608, April 29, 1924. See also H. P. Rathbone, "Whose Budget?", in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. VI, No. 6, June 1924, pp. 342-354, and *Monthly Circular of Labour Research Department*, June 1924, pp. 116-118.

² Hansard, 1609, April 29, 1924.

³ *Ibid.*, 1613-15, April 29, 1924.

sound financial lines." Well might Lord Asquith be satisfied, for it was in effect the old Liberal free trade budget with its promise of the cheaper breakfast table all over again.

The small decrease in working-class cost of living was soon swept away by rising prices.

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND THE CAPITALIST STATE

On economic and social issues, apart from the Wheatley Housing Bill and minor improvements in unemployment benefits, the record of the Labour Government was, as we have seen, one of class conciliation and retreat before the forces of capitalism. Still worse, on the home front, was its record of acceptance of, and domination by, the capitalist state. The whole reformist theory of the "neutrality" of the state, the whole conception that all that was necessary for the advance to socialism was to elect a Labour Government to office which would then take over (unchanged, virgin and intact) the old (capitalist) state, was put into practice. Hence, alas, on this issue, there could be no complaint of divergence between theory and practice, because the reformist theory of the state was practised without reserve or exception.

Labour Ministers were appointed, but instead of proceeding to cleanse their Ministries of the most reactionary of their permanent officials and advisers, they not only maintained them, but lauded them to the skies, listened to them, obeyed them. In their turn, the permanent civil servants quickly lost their first fears of their Labour Ministers, took them over, tamed them, and lauded them in their turn.

Thus Philip Snowden, the Chancellor of the Exchequer: "An experienced and sober civil servant", wrote Sir Percy James Grigg,¹ "has called Snowden 'the ideal of what a Minister should be'." Or the Right Hon. J. R. Clynes, Lord Privy Seal and Deputy Leader of the House of Commons: "All the time", he writes in his *Memoirs*,² "I found the permanent officials extraordinarily helpful and kind. They were always beside me advising, coaching and checking." Or Arthur Henderson at the Home Office: "If he enjoyed work in the Home Office", writes an admiring biographer,³ "the reason was in part, that

¹ Sir Percy James Grigg, *Prejudice and Judgment*, p. 136.

² Right Hon. J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, 1924-1937.

³ Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Arthur Henderson*, p. 241.

in his permanent Secretary, Sir John Anderson, he found a great chief of staff. . . . There was soon a very good mutual understanding between the two."

Or the supreme example—Ramsay MacDonald at the Foreign Office!¹ Once, in opposition, MacDonald had pledged himself to "end the bureaucracy of the Foreign Office, with its queer mentality and subversive selection of agents."² But, in office, the Foreign Office embraced him, absorbed him, swallowed him whole. As a commentator wrote at the time, he came, he saw, he was conquered.³ The old semi-feudal personnel were left untouched. The old advisers continued to give the old advice in the same old way. When it was a question of sending a special mission to the Government of Mexico, he proposed to appoint Sir Thomas Hohler, "whose name was a by-word for reactionary thought throughout Central Europe".⁴ The position was clearly summarised by a leading Foreign Office official. Mr. MacDonald, he declared, "is the easiest Foreign Secretary I have ever had to manage".⁵

It was not the Cabinet that controlled the civil servants, but the Ministries who managed the Ministers.

Significant in relation to the State was the attitude of the Labour Government to the role of the armed forces in industrial disputes. It had been for several years before 1924 an annual practice of the Labour Party to put forward an amendment to the annual Army Bill to prevent troops being employed as blacklegs to break strikes.⁶ But that was *in opposition and not in office*. The signature of Stephen Walsh, Minister of War, to the Army Order under Royal Warrant, established the Transport (Army) Reserve. Following the signature, negotiations developed between the Army and certain transport employers, and forms were issued declaring that the Army Reserve was available for strike-breaking purposes.⁷ Those signing the forms were available

¹ The fact that MacDonald himself took over the Foreign Office was very significant. In all his previous campaigns of exposure of secret diplomacy, Foreign office activity, MacDonald's main associate had been E. D. Morel, already famous before 1914 for his revelations of imperialist rule in the Congo, and during the 1914-1918 period for his *Truth and the War*. It had generally been expected in Labour circles that Morel, a real expert, would become (as he well deserved) the first Labour Foreign Secretary. A liberal-radical, an honest man (as Lenin once wrote of him), the shock of his complete exclusion from the Ministry helped to kill him.

² *The New Leader*, August 1923.

³ "U.D.C.", "The Diplomacy of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald", in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 7, Nos. 1 and 2, January and February, 1925 (pp. 23-27 and 104-117). "U.D.C." was W. N. Ewer.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Workers' Weekly*, May 9, 1924.

⁷ Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

“in case of imminent national danger or great emergency . . . to be called out on permanent service under the colours in the U.K. or elsewhere.”

When the Army and Air Force Annual Bill came before Parliament, Lansbury moved an amendment to allow soldiers the right to refuse to take duty in industrial disputes. This was opposed by the Minister of Labour, Tom Shaw and an other Cabinet Minister. Other similar amendments were put forward—such as the abolition of the death penalty in the Army (Thurtle), the right of any members in the forces sentenced to death to appeal to the Court of Criminal Appeal (Maxton), no officers or soldiers to be compelled to attend religious services (moved by a Liberal M.P.)—but *all were opposed by the Government*.¹

Arthur Henderson, who was so at home in the Home Office, went out of his way from the beginning to conciliate the police and to promise them his loyalty and protection. Dining in the Connaught Rooms in March with senior officers of the Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D.) he assured them that:

“He had the greatest possible desire to recognise the work the C.I.D. was doing, and the relationship between the Government and the police would be one of trust, confidence, and real friendship.”²

It had always been a Labour Party pledge that they would support the reinstatement of the militant policemen who had been so ruthlessly sacked after the police strike of 1919, and both MacDonald and Henderson had made promises in the past to this effect. But when this was raised in the House in mid-May by Jack Hayes, a former leader of the strike and now an M.P., Henderson, in a classic prevarication, declared:³

“I have been a trade unionist for 41 years. . . . Those of us who are prepared to try to bring about changes, either political or industrial, on constitutional lines, cannot make too clear the difference between the position of the military, the position of the police force, or the position shall I say, of the fire brigade, so far as taking up a ‘down tool’ policy is concerned.

“We tried to show our sympathy by saying we were in favour of the men being reinstated—I have also to point out that it was one

¹ Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

² *Workers' Weekly*, March 14, 1924.

³ *Ibid.*, May 23, 1924.

thing to be in favour, as I was in favour, and it was another thing to give effect."

Ministers kow-towed to Ministries. The senior civil servants were left unchanged. The most essential organs of political power—armed forces and police—kept their same composition and their same direction, i.e. against the militant workers. It is not surprising that the same is true of the most powerful, sinister and carefully selected of all (for their loyalty to the ruling class), the secret police and intelligence services, whose internal target remained, throughout the duration of the Labour Government, the most militant workers and, above all, the Communist Party. Sidney Webb (and no one could be better informed) reports that:

"The Home Secretary was continuously watching all their [the C.P.'s] proceedings and reporting weekly to the Prime Minister the discoveries of the police spies. . . ." ¹

Perhaps the British secret police have never been caught so red-handed in the act of labour espionage as in a famous incident which took place under the first Labour Government.²

On Sunday, April 13, two police spies were caught hiding at the Ben Greet Academy, Bedford Street, Strand, in the theatre hall where the London District Congress of the Party was taking place. Suspicious noises were heard during the lunch interval under the platform of the Rehearsal Theatre and a search revealed Sergeants Gill and Hopley of the C.I.D., caught in the act, together with their notebooks, the contents of which were then published in the *Workers' Weekly*.³ The notebooks contained evidence of espionage⁴ on earlier occasions. The Communist Party demanded a Labour Court of Enquiry into the Secret Service and the immediate cessation of Labour espionage activities. They challenged Henderson to invoke the Official Secrets Act against them for the publication of the notebooks.⁵ A whole group of Labour M.P.s supported the demands of the *Workers' Weekly*⁶ and the attitude of the Government was strongly challenged

¹ Ibid., May 2 and 9, 1924.

² Sidney Webb, "The First Labour Government", in *Political Quarterly*, January-March 1961, p. 30.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, April 18 and April 25, 1924.

⁴ Ibid., April 18, 1924.

⁵ The captured notebooks contained *inter alia* notes of conversations of delegates or Executive members at the bar of the Shaftesbury Hotel, where some had stayed.

⁶ *Workers' Weekly*, April 25, 1924.

in the House by George Lansbury and others. To such protest Mr. Henderson lamely replied that the two policemen had been concealed:

“in the course of their duty [Unionist cheers]. . . . The Communist Party is not illegal, but the declared policy of certain of its leaders would, if carried out by the methods proposed, involve breaches of the ordinary law of this country [‘hear hear’] and a certain amount of vigilance on the part of the police is called for if they are to discharge their duty to the rest of the community.”¹

On a number of particular issues, like the role of the armed forces in breaking strikes and the use of secret police against the labour movement, there was a considerable protest in militant Labour circles including a section of the Parliamentary Labour Party. But during the whole period of the first Labour Government, the only organisation consistently to raise the question of the state, to attack reformist theory and practice, and to lead the campaign for specific measures of democratisation, was the Communist Party. “We accuse the Labour Government”, declared a C.P.G.B. statement of early June, of:

“(1) Maintaining the secret police to spy on working-class organisations. . . .

“(2) Opening workers’ correspondence, and even using the information thus obtained for Trade Union Executives to take action against members. . . .

“(3) Maintaining soldiers to shoot strikers. . . .

“(4) Use of Lloyd George emergency legislation against strikes. . . .”²

At an Open Session of the Central Committee at the end of September 1924, a resolution was discussed and voted against “Anti-Labour Legislation”.³ In this the Party insisted on the need to accompany the struggle on economic issues by a fight against repressive legislation, to repeal existing laws on sedition, seditious libel, treason, felony, etc., which were used against the working class. The Party was conducting during the whole period, alongside the immediate fight on democratic issues, a more fundamental Marxist explanation on the class nature of the state, and the need, in order successfully to advance to socialism, to smash the old capitalist state machinery and for political power to pass into the hands of the working class.

¹ *H. C. Deb.*, April 14, 1924.

² *Workers’ Weekly*, June 6, 1924, p. 3.

³ *Resolution on Anti-Labour Legislation*, voted at open session of C.C. of C.P.G.B., September 28, 1924, reprinted in C.P.G.B. pamphlet, *Is it a Labour Government?*, pp. 30-31.

There was no possibility, the Communist Party continuously explained, of building socialism within the framework of capitalism and the existing capitalist state.

THE MINORITY MOVEMENT

The more militant attitudes of the industrial workers came more and more into contrast with the reactionary policy of the Labour Government on industrial issues and with the class-conciliation of many of the trade union leaders and officials. This contrast underlined the need for some rallying point, some co-ordinating centre for militant trade unionists both within particular trades and for the industrial movement as a whole. As month followed month, the breaking of strikes, the class-collaboration, the disappointing results of Labour legislation on unemployment and in the field of social services, the continued employers' attacks—all brought this issue to the fore. Unless it was channelled into anti-capitalist action the growing disillusionment with the Labour Government could turn into defeatism, and the new militancy could be replaced by a resumption of the headlong retreats of the previous years.

This was the problem that faced the Communist Party, the British Bureau of R.I.L.U. and the more active and militant trade unionists in the first months of 1924. Moreover this was a period when the Communist Party itself was endeavouring to improve its mass work, to strengthen its contact with the workers in industry, and when:

“it was necessary to make a decisive turn towards mass work in the factories, trade unions and working-class organisations, and to try to end the old sectarian traditions of the British revolutionary movement once and for all.

“There emerged from this general policy the idea of trying to organise the Left minority inside the trade unions and Labour Party in order to fight for the demands of the masses and, at the same time, to attempt to change the whole reformist policy and leadership of the official Labour movement.”¹

Already in the latter months of 1923, under the leadership of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U., a number of militant centres had begun to develop in different industries, especially amongst the miners, under

¹ Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, chapter X, “The National Minority Movement”.

the name of Minority Movements.¹ The Miners' Minority Movement was launched in the South Wales coalfield in August 1923 and spread rapidly, first to other coalfields, and then to other industries. On January 26, 1924, a representative meeting was held of Miners' Minority Movements from different districts with representatives from the South Wales, Yorkshire, Durham, Lancashire and Cheshire and Scottish Coalfields, and with Arthur Horner (South Wales), W. Pearson (Durham) and George Allison (Scotland) amongst the delegates. The meeting established a national centre of the Miners' Minority Movement (M.M.M.) and worked out a militant programme with which to campaign inside the Miners' Federation, not to divide it, but to revive it, unify it, restore it to life and activity, to give it a new authority amongst the miners.² The M.M.M., with Nat Watkins as its National Organiser, won increasing support. In a number of Districts of the M.F.G.B. its programme was adopted *in toto*, and then by the Federation itself. The work of the M.M.M. was one of the main factors in the election of A. J. Cook to replace Frank Hodges as Secretary of the Miners' Federation.

In these first months of 1924 the idea of Minority Movements spread to other industries—to the transport workers who held a Minority Conference at the end of June,³ (where George Hardy was one of the participants), to the engineers who worked out a programme of demands for the metal-working industries,⁴ to the builders and vehicle builders.⁵ The campaigning around the programmes worked out by the individual Minority Movement centres in different industries gave rise to a growing demand for a national co-ordinating centre that would be stronger and more deeply based in the mass movement than the British Bureau of R.I.L.U.:

“They [the Minority Movements] began to make themselves felt, and from every part of the country requests were made that an effort should be made to bring into existence a national organisation that would co-ordinate all the various activities, and that task,

¹ A brief account of this growth was given by W. Gallacher, then Secretary of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U., to the Inaugural Conference of the National Minority Movement, August 23–24, 1924.

² W. Gallacher, *op. cit.*, and *Workers' Weekly*, February 1 and March 21, 1924.

³ W. Gallacher, *op. cit.*, and *Workers' Weekly*, July 4, 1924.

⁴ W. Gallacher, *op. cit.*, and *Workers' Weekly*, May 2, 1924, and June 27, 1924, “The Metal-Workers Minority Movement”, by W. Hannington.

⁵ *Workers' Weekly*, March 21, 1924.

those of us who were associated with the R.I.L.U., that task we have taken on."¹

In April 1924, the British Bureau decided to convene a national conference of militant trade unionists including representatives of all the existing Minority Movement Committees.² The first invitations were despatched in May.³ At the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party (Manchester, mid-May 1924) the whole issue of the Minority Movement was opened up before the delegates by Harry Pollitt, and a resolution adopted strongly supporting the need for a co-ordinating centre:⁴

"The Communist Party welcomes these Minority Movements as the sign of the awakening of the workers. The C.P. will throw itself wholeheartedly into the struggle of the Minority Movements and will do all in its power to assist them in their struggles.

"The Communist Party, however, declares unhesitatingly to all the workers that the various minority movements cannot realise their full power so long as they remain sectional, separate and limited in their scope and character. The many streams of the rising forces of the workers must be gathered together in one powerful mass movement. . . ."

A Conference was finally convened to meet at London on August 23-24, 1924, and here was formed the National Minority Movement (N.M.M.) which was to play so important a role in the industrial struggles of Britain over the next few years.⁵

Over 270 delegates assembled first at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, and later at the Battersea Town Hall. They represented in all some 200,000 workers from trade union branches (with a few District and Executive Committees), Trades Councils, Minority Movement and Unemployed Committees.⁶

¹ W. Gallacher, *op. cit.*

² *Workers' Weekly*, April 4, 1924. The original intention was to hold it in Sheffield in mid-July.

³ *Ibid.*, May 16, 1924.

⁴ *Report of the Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 34.

⁵ See *Report of National Minority Conference*, August 23-24, 1924, published by N.M.M., 24 pp., and also *Workers' Weekly*, July 4 and 11, August 29, 1924.

⁶ The Credentials Report in the unpublished verbatim report of the Conference showed that amongst the delegates, besides the miners, there were 48 A.E.U. members (including three representatives from District Committees), 14 from N.A.F.T.A. (including two from the Executive Council), 14 from the Municipal Workers, 13 from the T.G.W.U., 12 from the N.U.R. and 33 from Trades Councils.

The most important document of the Conference was the Manifesto addressed to the T.U.C.,¹ due to meet in the following month at Hull for its Fifty-sixth Annual Congress. The Manifesto pointed to the contrast over the past twelve months between "the increasing stagnation and decay of the old (trade union) leadership" and the growth of rank and file struggle exposed in repeated unofficial strikes, strikes which belied the claim that the workers were apathetic. On the contrary the Manifesto declared:

"they prove that the fighting spirit of the workers is not only unimpaired, but that this spirit properly organised and led in a common movement could be made to achieve a great victory."

Criticising the foreign policy (Dawes Plan) and home policy (particularly in relation to strikes) of the Labour Government, the Manifesto put before the T.U.C. the task of strengthening the organisation, unity and combativity of the trade union movement:

"where the workers are fighting it is in sections and for different demands. Every section is fighting for its own policy, there is no common struggle or common leadership. The forces of the workers are divided and the capitalists continue to inflict crushing defeats. . . .

"In this situation what is the greatest need of the trade union movement? It is the need to battle . . . to organise the workers for common action against the capitalists."

To unite the various streams of industrial struggle some common aim, common objective was needed. So the Manifesto put to the Hull T.U.C. proposals for an immediate programme of struggle—an increase of £1 per week and a minimum wage of £4 per week; a 44-hour working week; the formation of Workshop Committees; the reorganisation and strengthening of the Trades Councils; the affiliation of the N.U.W.C.M. and the Trades Councils to the T.U.C. and their representation on the General Council; the creation of a General Council with full powers to direct the activities of the unions; workers' control of industry; pressure on the Labour Government for reversal of its present policy; repeal of the Anti-Labour Laws; repudiation of the Dawes Report and campaign against the war danger; and finally action to secure the international unity of the trade union movement.

A number of particular resolutions were adopted at the Conference

¹ *Report*, pp. 4-8.

which emphasised and extended specific sections of the Manifesto.¹ Of these, perhaps, the most important were the resolution on "Factory Committees",² moved by J. R. Campbell and that on "Trades Councils",³ moved by Tom Quelch.

Factory Committees were essential, the resolution explained, for effective industrial struggle. It was in the factories that the process of exploitation takes place. It was in the factories that workers of different trades, outlooks, ages are brought together:

"The factories, workshops, mines, mills, garages, railway stations, ships, dockyards, etc., are all natural assembly places where wage slavery operates. . . . It necessarily follows, therefore, that it is in these places that the workers are compelled to make their first stand in defence of their interests and to organise resistance to the encroachments of the employers."

Factory committees, the rudiments of which had already developed in the engineering, building, printing and other industries, the resolution continued, united sections of workers in a given undertaking, broke down division and sectionalism, negotiated improvements of conditions in a specific workshop or concern, saw that wage agreements were carried out by the employers. They would support and strengthen from below the work and struggle of the trade unions.

In the same interest of unity and united working-class struggle was the resolution on Trades Councils. It noted with approval the recent revival of the Councils and the steps under way to bring into being a National Federation of Trades Councils. The Councils should be affiliated to, represented in, an integral part of the T.U.C. it stated. They should aim:

"to focus, to combine under one central local leadership all the forces of the working class movement."

They should be not, as some had become, mere debating societies, or as others, mere electoral bodies, but effective fighting associations, "the leading local organs of the class struggle".

At the end of the Conference a resolution was moved by Harry Pollitt, seconded by Arthur Horner, on the organisation and aim of

¹ Including resolutions on the conduct of the Labour Government, the minimum wage, working hours, the Unemployed Movement, the character of the General Council, international trade union unity, the position of young workers in industry, the Co-operative Movement and the Dawes Report.

² *Resolution 4 in Report*, pp. 12-14.

³ *Resolution 5 in Report*, pp. 14-16.

the National Minority Movement,¹ the name adopted by the new co-ordinating centre. It was made quite clear that the N.M.M. *was not set up in opposition to the existing trade unions*. On the contrary, its aim was to strengthen them, to restore to them that fighting capacity for which their founders had formed them and of which they were being robbed by reformist and conciliating leadership. The N.M.M. would work with the existing organisations of the workers, would fight to win support for its programme, would combat "the present tendency towards social peace and class collaboration". It would endeavour to:

"unite the workers in the every-day struggles against capitalism, and at all times to advance the watchword of the united front of the workers against the exploiters".

It would maintain close relations with R.I.L.U. whilst working to establish international trade union unity.

At the end of the Conference, the delegates elected an Executive Committee based on representatives from the different sections of the Minority Movement, which included amongst its 15 members Wal Hannington, Arthur Horner, George Hardy, H. Joy, W. Loeber, Harry Pollitt, Tom Quelch and Nat Watkins.² After the Conference the Executive chose its officers with Tom Mann as the first President, Harry Pollitt as General Secretary, George Hardy as Organising Secretary, and George Fletcher (the militant Sheffield baker) as Treasurer.

The formation of the N.M.M., on the initiative of the Communist Party and, in particular, under the leadership of Harry Pollitt, was to be a step of very great significance for the next few years of working-class struggle in Britain.

It is true that it did carry with it a certain danger that it should, as Pollitt later wrote,³ be regarded "as a separate and rival body to the trade unions and to the T.U.C.", but this was *never its aim*, and so it was made clear from the first. It was the right-wing trade union leaders who, fearing its influence, constantly made attacks and allegations along those lines.

The N.M.M., once formed, began at once to extend its sections from miners, builders and transport workers to distributive workers, dockers, seamen and railwaymen.⁴ Already by October 1924, it had

¹ *Report*, pp. 19-21.

² See Appendix IV to this chapter for details of the first leadership of the N.M.M.

³ Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, chapter X, "The National Minority Movement".

⁴ Harry Pollitt, *Secretary's Report to E.C. of N.M.M.*, October 3, 1924.

organised District Conferences at Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and other industrial centres.¹ It organised a great rally of 10,000 at Trafalgar Square on October 10 around the issues of higher wages, the 44-hour week and the rejection of the Dawes Plan.²

The N.M.M., from its foundation broader and more influential than the British Bureau of R.I.L.U., brought together the most militant trade unionists from the key industries, helped them to learn from each other, gave them a new confidence and greater clarity of purpose, helped to combat defeatism, to resist the employers' offensive, to struggle against the theory and practice of class conciliation.

The militant slogans and programmes launched by the N.M.M. were discussed and won increasing support inside the trade unions. The call for factory committees and strengthening the Trades Councils found a wide echo. It is significant that many of the proposals first launched by the N.M.M. were adopted in ensuing years by the official trade union movement. The Hull Congress of the T.U.C., already in September 1924, reflected in its political advance over the preceding Plymouth T.U.C. and in its progressive decisions the hard and patient work of the British Bureau of R.I.L.U. and of the N.M.M. By its actions, its propaganda, its programmes the trade union movement was made stronger and more united.

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

There is a single policy of British imperialism which cannot, as "experts" are so prone to do, be neatly compartmentalised into "home" and "international". Indeed its world policy, to an extent, governs its domestic policy, and the interests of the workers at home and the requirements of home industrial development are not infrequently sacrificed to the world strategy of British finance-capital. Equally the record of the Labour Government in the field of foreign affairs could in no way be distinguished from their record on the home front. The issues that arose on foreign policy were no less class issues than the questions of wages and homes and rents. The Government could work for war or peace; it could support foreign capitalist governments, militarist and fascist dictators or the struggles of the working people in foreign lands, support imperialism or resist it. And the issues that

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Workers' Weekly*, October 17, 1924.

confronted the Labour Government in 1924 in the international arena were clear-cut class issues, on which there could be no long-term middle path of compromise, but on which the Government would have to declare itself on one class side or the other.

The labour movement or at least its more militant sections had, time and again, expressed themselves for the reduction of armaments. What would the Labour Government do when faced with the submission of estimates for the Army, Navy or Air Force? There was a strong feeling and a powerful demand for the abandonment of the Versailles Treaty, the reparations and all that was involved. What would the Labour Government do? Right in the forefront there loomed the issue of the future relations between Britain and the Soviet Union. It was obvious here that two conflicting class approaches faced one another—recognition or non-recognition, trade or boycott, help for the Russian workers building socialism for the first time in history or defence of the bond holders, capitalist creditors and White Guard émigrés—in a word friendship or hostility. Would the Labour Government take its stand with imperialist governments, with militarist and fascist dictators or alongside the working people of different lands? Would it be for war or peace, militarism or disarmament, international rivalry and aggression or international settlement?

On the home front, when it came to the point, the class struggles had been fought out not in the form of labour movement and Labour Government versus capitalism, capitalist state and press, capitalist parties, but of working class, represented by Communist Party, Minority Movement, militant trade unionists, militants from within the Labour Party and I.L.P. versus all the forces of capitalism supported by the Labour Government and the right-wing leaders of Labour Party and the T.U.C. It was not to be otherwise in the field of international affairs. Perhaps in this field the class conciliation of the Labour Government and its capitulation before the pressures of the ruling class was even more glaring.

Rearmament or Disarmament?

On June 28 of the previous year the I.L.P. had moved an official resolution at the Labour Party Conference in favour of voting against all military and naval estimates. Disarmament had been the electoral pledge of the Labour Party. The I.L.P.'s *Socialist Programme*¹ had promised that a Labour Government would "take the initiative in

¹ I.L.P., *Socialist Programme*, November 1923.

making positive proposals for immediate world disarmament".

The issue was not long in the test. On February 21, 1924, C. G. Ammon, Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty, announced that the Government would proceed with the laying down of five new cruisers and two destroyers.¹ The Tories were delighted and the capitalist press reassured and complacent. *The Times* commented the following day:

"They [the Cabinet] have shown a real largeness of view in rising above the deep-rooted prejudices of many among their adherents. . . ."²

Opposition was strong not only from the Communist Party³ but from considerable sections of the Labour Party, I.L.P. and trade union movement extending even to the Parliamentary Labour Party. The Government's Navy estimates, with the help of a united Tory vote, were voted in mid-March by 301 to 114, but *fourteen* Labour M.P.s were amongst the opposition.⁴

The programme for enlarging the Air Force, instituted by Sir Samuel Hoare under the Conservative Government, was continued by the new Air Minister, Lord Thomson. "Continued" is the operative word, for "continuity" of foreign policy was to be the watchword of the Labour Government and is the essence of the reformist attitude to foreign affairs. The Air Force estimates were in fact increased by £2,500,000 over those of the previous Government.⁵ William Leach, Under-Secretary for Air, almost boasted:⁶

"The number of new squadrons to be formed this year is eight. The first interim Geddes report on National Expenditure presented at the beginning of 1922 . . . recommended that the Air Force Estimates be reduced . . . we have departed from that recommendation. The Labour Party assumed office immediately following the adoption by the House of an enlargement scheme and decided not to interfere with that scheme."

An equal esteem for "continuity" was shown in the Army Estimates. The Secretary of State for War, Stephen Walsh, proclaimed:

¹ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, chapter XII, p. 211, and Snowden, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, pp. 622-623.

² *The Times*, February 22, 1924.

³ See *Workers' Weekly*, February 29, 1924.

⁴ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 212, and 171 *H. C. Deb.*, 325-402 (March 18, 1924).

⁵ Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

⁶ Hansard, May 4, 1924.

"If the disappearance of the German menace has naturally reacted upon the size of the Army, it must not be forgotten that we have possessions at great distances; these cannot be left defenceless. These considerations make the Army really a non-Party question. That is why I have found no difficulty in putting forward the Estimates which are now before the House, and which have been prepared in accordance with the announcement made by my predecessor last June [1923] to the effect that, while administrative economies would be continued, no policy of further reductions in the fighting arms was in contemplation."¹

The Government opposed not only all reductions in Army expenditure but, as we have already seen, all Labour amendments that would have changed the traditional (capitalist) role of the Army as strike breakers. It could be said that, through the medium of Lord Haldane² and of the permanent officials of state, the Government took all the advice of the capitalists, whilst it rejected all the advice of its own militant supporters and, indeed, many official Labour Conference decisions.

In face of continued protest, therefore, not only from Communists and militants, but from many amongst its own supporters who simply wished to remain true to traditional policy and electoral pledges, the Government maintained, continued, pursued the policy of its predecessors, the policy of the capitalist class.³

Labour and the Dawes Plan

On December 12, 1923, the American Government had approved the idea of appointing representatives to a Committee of Enquiry (of "experts") to study the problem of German reparations.⁴ Two Committees were appointed, of which the first and more important was under the chairmanship of General Charles G. Dawes, President of the Central Trust Company of Chicago. Early in April 1924 the Committee's Reports were put to the Reparations Commission. To no small extent the work of one of the British experts on the Committee, Sir Josiah Stamp, the Dawes Plan proposed that Germany's currency

¹ Quoted in *Workers' Weekly*, March 21, 1924.

² In his *Life of Viscount Haldane*, Sir Frederick Maurice writes: "The Government accepted Haldane's advice on national defence." Haldane saw his special role to protect the committee of Imperial Defence from "Labour pacifists".

³ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 213, "The Government's record in defence . . . shows scarcely any concession to the Party's radical traditions."

⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter X, "The European Problem".

should be stabilised on a gold basis, that Germany should make annual reparations payments for 30 years rising from 1,000 million gold marks the first year to 2,500 millions in the fifth and subsequent years, that the money should be obtained through taxation (guaranteed by earmarking of customs and excise revenues) and from bonds (issued against the German railways and from certain German industrial debentures), that an Agent-General for reparations payments should be appointed, and in return for what in fact meant virtually putting the whole of German economy at the mercy of Allied capital, Germany should be granted an international loan of 800 million gold marks (£40 million).¹

The Labour Government had hardly assumed office when it was faced with the necessity to take up an attitude on the proposals of the Dawes Committee. This should not, in theory at least, have been a difficult decision. The Government had been pledged to a definite policy. The Labour Party's Electoral Programme² had promised:

"the immediate calling by the British Government of an International Conference (including Germany, on terms of equality) to deal with the revision of the Versailles Treaty, especially Reparations and Debts. . . ."

The I.L.P.'s *Socialist Programme*³ was still clearer:

"Socialists would immediately call an International Conference to deal with the problems of Europe and the world, not from the point of view of victors or vanquished, but of world needs. They would forgo all claims to reparations, and would indicate their willingness to cancel the Allied debts as part of an all-round settlement."

The Government's approach was a sharp break with its own official policy and maintenance of or "continuity" with the policy of its capitalist predecessors. MacDonald was hardly installed as Premier and Foreign Minister than he began the friendliest negotiations with the Versailles Treaty-loving French Prime Minister, Poincaré, and then endorsed the Dawes Plan within a week of its publication,⁴ giving

¹ C. L. Mowat, *Britain between the Wars, 1918-40*, pp. 178-179.

² *Daily Herald*, November 19, 1923.

³ I.L.P., *The Socialist Programme*, November 1923, pp. 11-12.

⁴ See Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 160, "In view of the Party's opposition to reparations, it may seem surprising that MacDonald devoted himself to the adoption and implementation of the Dawes Report, which was based on the Versailles Treaty."

its fullest blessing to the proposals of a Committee which consisted of Allied big businessmen and their expert advisers.

Within the Labour Party and the trade union movement there was considerable anger and opposition. E. D. Morel attacked the Dawes Plan in the House of Commons. The Miners' Federation particularly resented the proposed reparations payments in the form of coal. Marchbanks of the N.U.R. called the Plan a settlement for "the benefit of international capitalists". In the Presidential Address to the Hull Trades Union Congress, A. A. Purcell strongly attacked it for placing the whole burden of reparations on the backs of the German working class, and the Hull Congress passed a resolution of opposition by a large majority.

The most consistent opposition to the Dawes Plan was that of the Communist Party, which fought it from the first. The Party's attitude was most fully outlined in the Central Committee Manifesto, *Experts' Report on Germany*, published towards the end of June.¹ The "Experts' Report", it proclaimed, was nothing but "a new and up-to-date edition of the Versailles Treaty". Baldwin had set the capitalist financial and economic experts to overhaul the Treaty and it was "the results of their work that MacDonald has inherited and confirmed". The Labour electoral pledges had been cynically and shamelessly broken. The Plan was put forward as a means of "transforming Germany into a colony of Allied capitalism". Cheap labour in Germany would be used to force down wages and working conditions in Britain, France and America.

Condemning the Labour Government's policy as one of "broken pledges and abandoned principles", the Party called on the workers:

"in their factories and workshops, in their unions and trades councils, and upon those who claim to be friends of the workers—at Westminster, in the General Council, and elsewhere—to repudiate their Experts' Report as a crime against the interests of world Labour, and to repudiate the MacDonald Government which has thrown in its lot with capitalism."

Under slogans of "Annulment of the Versailles Treaty", "Abandonment of Reparations", "Withdrawal of British troops from Germany" and "Summoning of a World Conference, representing workers as well as Governments, for a new World Settlement", the Communist

¹ In *Workers' Weekly* of June 27, 1924. See also R. Palme Dutt in "Notes of the Month" in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 6, No. 6, June 1924.

Party launched a campaign of meetings and demonstrations. But it was not strong enough to force the Government to change its policy. In June MacDonald conferred with the French radical leader Edouard Herriot, who had succeeded Poincaré as Premier and, in July, the London Conference was opened by MacDonald and endorsed the Dawes Report.

The Dawes Plan was a capitalist plan, elaborated by capitalist experts. In essence it was a scheme for the defeat of the threat of German revolution arising again in the course of 1923. By the Plan the whole of the German railway system, the most important railway network in Europe, was to be handed over to a joint-stock company, of which effective control would be in the hands of a foreign (it turned out to be an American) Commissioner. The Labour Government's support of the Dawes Plan was another and glaring example of the reformist theory (and practice) of "continuity" of foreign policy.

Relations with Russia

Like all other aspects of foreign affairs the burning questions of relations with Russia was a class question. It could be approached from a working-class point of view or from the point of view of the ruling capitalist class.¹ For the capitalists, the Soviet Union was the legal successor to the Tsarist Empire, bound to accept all the Tsarist obligations and to pay all the Tsarists' debts, to return or pay for all foreign nationalised property. For them the U.S.S.R. had no legal counter-claim, for the vast damage wrought by the wars of intervention and blockade was effected in defence of the sacred rights of property. And in view of the fact that it was a socialist state, the Soviet Union was to be squeezed to the last pound of flesh. This was the attitude of the press from the *Morning Post* to the *New Statesman*. A working-class approach would have been diametrically opposite. Russia would be seen as the first Workers' State in world history defending the interests of the working class of the world. It would be appreciated that the Soviet working class and people, having overthrown their own capitalists, had no liability for the debts and obligations contracted by the Tsarist régime but, on the contrary, if a balance *was* due, it was owed to the Soviet people and Government for damages suffered in the aggressive wars of intervention.

As always, the Labour Government had made its promises. In his

¹ C. M. Roebuck, "The Workers and the Anglo-Soviet Treaty" in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 6, No. 10, October 1924, pp. 602-611.

famous programmatic speech at the Albert Hall on January 8, 1924, Ramsay MacDonald had pledged that:¹

“The pompous folly of standing aloof from the Russian Government will be ended. . . . I want trade, I want negotiations.”

The Labour Election Manifesto had spoke of the “resumption of free economic and diplomatic relations with Russia”. The I.L.P. *Socialist Programme* had declared that a socialist government would “recognise and establish friendly relations with Russia” and would grant extensive credits for reopening European trade.² The restoration of friendly economic and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union was, perhaps, the one thing that those who had voted Labour at the previous elections now counted on as a certainty.

In fact, however, the Labour Government’s attitude was anti-Soviet from the beginning, bending all too willingly to heavy capitalist pressure. But on the issue of Anglo-Soviet relations there was a strong pressure in the other direction not only from Communists and militant working-class sectors, but from many progressive people including, at times, a considerable number of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

On February 1, 1924, the Labour Government recognised *de jure* the Soviet Government, but even here there had been delay and procrastination. At the end of January there were all sorts of rumours about unforeseen difficulties. It was reported that the Foreign Office was “unwilling”. A letter of reproach and insistence was published in the *Daily Herald* over the signature of D. Carmichael, Secretary of the London Trades Council, who had gone so far as to book a hall for a meeting to protest against the delay.³ The recognition Note of February 1, wrung out of the Government under the pressure of Labour opinion, declared that in order to prepare for a complete treaty that would “settle all questions outstanding between the two countries”, it would be necessary to discuss such questions as the settlement of claims and the issue of propaganda directed to the overthrow of institutions—already ominous phases. The Soviet reply of February 8 declared their readiness to discuss and settle all questions in a friendly spirit and to send representatives to London with full powers to bring about a settlement.

¹ Quoted by W. P. and Zelda K. Coates in *History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, Vol. I, p. 130.

² I.L.P., *Socialist Programme*, November 1923, pp. 12–13.

³ W. P. and Zelda Coates, *op. cit.*, chapter VI.

It was only after the *de jure* recognition that the full pressure of capitalist interests really began to be exerted and that the bankers' and bondholders' lobby really got going.¹ The Government appointed a Commission to negotiate outstanding issues, with the sinister figure of J. D. Gregory of the Foreign Office in charge of its political and Sir Sydney Clapman of the Board of Trade of its economic sections. The Soviet delegation arrived on April 9 and a joint opening meeting was arranged for April 14.

On that morning, a Manifesto appeared in all the capitalist newspapers signed by the leading bankers of Britain on the subject of Russian debts.² They demanded, as a precondition to the consideration of credits and loans to Russia, the Soviet recognition of public and private debts, their acceptance of restitution of private property to foreigners, their guarantee "that in future private property shall in all circumstances be free from danger of confiscation by the State", and, moreover:

"that bankers, industrialists and traders in this country shall be able to deal freely, without interference by Government authorities, with similar private institutions in Russia controlled by men of whom they have personal knowledge, and in whose character, word and resource they have confidence."

They furthermore demanded (deliberately confusing the roles of the Soviet Government and the Soviet Communist Party) that the Russian Government, should, as they put it, abandon their propaganda against institutions of other countries, particularly those from whom they were requesting financial assistance.

An apt answer was published the following day (April 15) over the signature, amongst others, of A. A. Purcell, Ben Turner, M.P., R. C. Wallhead, M.P. and Robert Williams, Secretary of the Transport Workers' Federation, declaring that, from their experience as members of the 1920 delegation to Russia, "Russia's counter-claims upon the British Government were *as justifiable*" and warning that:

"the London bankers are trying to bring about by economic intervention what has proved to be impossible by military intervention, namely, to dictate to the Russian people what form of a Government

¹ See detailed account of this pressure in W. P. and Zelda Coates, *op. cit.*, chapter VII, pp. 153-181.

² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

and what form of economic administration the Russian people and their leaders should adopt.”

Negotiations continued in April and May with the increasing pressure of the bankers and bondholders, aided by the White émigrés who, in the old Russian Embassy at Chesham House, ran something like a factory of anti-Soviet slander. The capitalist press daily echoed their demands in banner headlines. The Grand Duke Nicholas published a Manifesto declaring that he had been invited to place himself “at the head of a movement for the liberation of Russia”. And all this time, the Labour Government was weakening, capitulating, becoming more and more the mouthpiece of the bankers and the reactionary officials of the Foreign Office.

Pressure on the Government from militant Labour circles, trade unions, and local sections of the Labour Party and I.L.P. continued but, on the whole, intermittently and unco-ordinated. Once again the only consistent struggle was the work of the Communist Party. In mid-May the Communist Party, in the form of a *Memorandum to the Anglo-Soviet Conference*,¹ put forward a seven-point programme for mass campaigning. The Memorandum demanded that the British Government should recognise Russia’s right to nationalise capitalist property without compensation, that the pre-war Tsarist debts should be annulled with the British Government compensating small bondholders, that the Tsarist war debts should be cancelled in return for the Soviet withdrawal of its counter-claims, that a trade unionist nominated by the General Council of the T.U.C. should be despatched as Ambassador to Moscow, that the British Government should guarantee a £100 million credit to the Soviet Government, that the British ratification of the Rumanian seizure of Bessarabia should be withdrawn, and that there should be a joint British-Soviet initiative for the summoning of an international disarmament conference.

The battle continued week after week. Each new bondholders’ blackmail brought a restrained Soviet reply. Against the bankers’ demands, more and more working-class meetings were being held up and down the country. On August 5 an official British communiqué was issued stating that negotiations had broken down and the Treaty would not be signed. The reactionary press rejoiced. “The abortive outcome of these months of intermittent discussion,” proclaimed the *Daily Telegraph*, “was foreseen from the beginning.” In

¹ *Workers’ Weekly*, May 16, 1924.

fact this was not to be. There was a strong movement of protest in the militant circles of the working class.

Of special importance was the militant intervention of a group of Labour Members of Parliament. Six Labour M.P.s, hearing of the breakdown, proceeded to the room of Arthur Ponsonby, the Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, on August 5, and, with his consent, made contact with the Soviet representatives. That evening some 18 Labour M.P.s met with the Russians, and later that night sent four of their number to make renewed representations to Mr. Ponsonby.

The next day the four Labour M.P.s again acted as unofficial negotiators, and this time with success.

The breakdown had been due just as much to the Government's own insistence on compensation for the owners of nationalised properties as to the bondholders' lobby. The successful renewal of negotiation was due to pressure from the left, and, above all, to the prompt intervention of Labour backbenchers.¹

To the fury of the Conservative press, it was announced on August 6, the following day, in the House of Commons, that agreement had been reached. On August 7 the Draft Treaties were put before the House. The next day, two Treaties, one commercial and one general, were signed at the Foreign Office.

But still the battle was not over. The signing of the Treaties was the signal for redoubled attack. The Tories stormed, supported by Lloyd George. The Federation of British Industries (F.B.I.) opposed the Treaties. Asquith a little later, in a public letter, came out in unreserved opposition. The issue of ratification of the Treaty became a central issue of the struggle, with a strong campaign being waged by the Communists and other militants of the labour movement, but when Labour was defeated at the October General Election the Treaty was still unratified.

The *de jure* recognition (though not yet exchange of Ambassadors), and the signature of the Treaty certainly represented a progressive step forward in Anglo-Soviet relations, but there was little credit to the Labour Government which had swayed like a leaf in the wind, now capitulating all too willingly to the pressure of the bankers and bondholders, now yielding a little to working-class pressure. The small credit in the situation was due in the main to the actions, meetings, protest demonstrations and deputations of the Labour militants with

¹ For an account of this action see E. D. Morel in *Foreign Affairs*, August 1924, and W. P. and Zelda K. Coates, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 165-168.

the Communist Party as the key political voice of the demands of the Left.

Solidarity or Suppression?

In every issue of foreign policy and international relations the same alternative confronted the Labour Government—to adopt a progressive approach, to accept and apply the principle of international working-class solidarity, or to “continue” the foreign policy of the capitalist class and to follow a policy of solidarity with British and world imperialism.

In June 1924, for instance, the issue arose sharply of the continued British occupation of the Rhineland. In the zones of British occupation deportations and arrest of militant German workers, the suppression of Socialist papers, continued under the Labour just as under the previous Tory Government. During the whole of 1923 the Cologne Communist daily *Sozialistische Republik* had four times been banned by the British authorities. It suffered suppression on five occasions in the first four months alone of the Labour Government. Only the British Communist Party consistently campaigned for the withdrawal of all British troops from Germany.¹

An even more striking example of “continuity” of foreign policy was the attitude of MacDonald and the Labour Government to events in China. The year 1924 was a period of striking advance for the Chinese people in their struggle both against their own warlords and landlords and against foreign imperialism.² Under the leadership of the great Chinese revolutionary, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the broad national-liberation organisation, the Kuomintang, had been reorganised in the course of 1923 and a policy adopted of united action with the Chinese Communist Party. On this basis the first National Congress of the Kuomintang was held in January 1924 (with Mao Tse-tung amongst the Communist delegates who attended). The Kuomintang became for a period a broad united anti-imperialist organisation, with a vanguard role of leadership fulfilled by the Communist Party, and representing the four progressive classes in China—the working class, peasantry, petty-bourgeoisie and national

¹ See, for instance, *Workers' Weekly*, June 6, 1914, p. 1.

² See Hu Shang, *Imperialism and Chinese Politics*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1955, chapter VI, section 5, pp. 285-294; and Ho Kan-chih, *A History of the Modern Chinese Revolution*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, chapter III, sections 1 and 2, pp. 71-87.

bourgeoisie. Under the renovated Kuomintang the Canton (Southern) Chinese Government became the rallying point of popular struggle not only against the feudal warlords but against foreign imperialism.

It was not by accident, therefore, that imperialism, including in the first place, the British imperialists, should decide to strengthen their traditional gunboat policy in China and, moreover, try by every means to overthrow the Canton Government. It was under a Labour Government, and with its connivance, that British reaction prepared its plan and diverse plots.

In May 1924, the British-owned *North-China Daily News* of Shanghai called for a "punitive war" against China. In April, already, the foreign envoys in China had met and decided to strengthen their fleets on the north coast, on the Yangtse river in Central China (always a happy hunting ground of gunboat politics), and on the southern Chekiang-Fukien-Kwangtung coast. The new political direction of the Kuomintang had made foreign imperialism determined to crush it.

The political policy of the Kuomintang and of the Canton Government favoured the organisation of the working class. New progressive labour laws were enacted and the trade union movement became legal, to the fury of foreign imperialism. And the anger of the British imperialists, in particular, heightened when the Communist Party of China led a successful strike of the workers in the foreign-owned factories of the British concession of Shameen in Canton against police regulations which obliged Chinese citizens to show identification passes on entering or leaving the area.

But the most direct action of intervention during this period took place during August-October 1924, the last months of office of the Labour Government in Britain. A so-called "Canton Merchant Corps" was organised under the ostensible leadership of Chen Lien-po, a comprador capitalist of the British-owned Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. The "Corps" first threatened a "suspension of business" and then proceeded to stir up armed riots against the Canton Government. Sun Yat-sen quickly recognised that behind the riots stood British imperialism:

"... those Englishmen who are against the Kuomintang . . . have been persuading him (Chen Lien-po) daily to revolt against the government, saying: 'If you succeed in inducing the "merchant corps" to rise against the government, Britain will help you to

organise a government ruled by merchants, and you will become the Washington of China.'"¹

When the Canton Government took steps to suppress the rebellion of the "Merchant Corps", the British authorities, responsible to the Labour Government in Britain, began to protest. Sun Yat-sen commented:

"On August 29 [1924], the British Consul-General addressed a note to the Canton Government, pointing out that the Consular body at Shameen was protesting against the 'wanton' act of bombarding an open city. The concluding part of the note was tantamount to a declaration of war. It said that the British naval command had informed the British Consul-General that instructions had been received from the Commander-in-Chief of the British Fleet in Hong Kong to the effect that, should the Chinese authorities fire upon the city, all available British naval forces would immediately go into action. . . ."²

The "Merchant Corps" rebellion lasted from August to October. At no stage did the Labour Government do other than support and "continue" the policy of its predecessors, i.e. the treatment of China as an unequal semi-colonial possession.

Though there were intermittent protests from various sections of the Labour and trade union movement, it was only the Communist Party that carried out a consistent struggle to end intervention in China. The campaign, which the Party initiated, under the slogan "Hands off China" was to be revived on many occasions in the succeeding years.

In its issue of September 12, 1924 the *Workers' Weekly* called for a mass struggle against British intervention in China. It published and endorsed the appeal of the Communist International of September 4—*Hands off the Chinese Revolution*.³ The Appeal protested that:

"the British Labour Government, at the head of which stands one of the leaders of the Second International, J. Ramsay MacDonald, is preparing for armed intervention in South China for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang."

¹ *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen* (Chinese), Vol. II, p. 66.

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, September 19, 1924.

It denounced the threats of the British Consul-General and appealed to the workers of Britain:

"Workers of Great Britain, you must not, you cannot allow the British imperialists in your name to shoot down Chinese revolutionaries as they did recently in Hankow and on the Yangtze kiang [river], when British naval officers shot down the leaders of the Railwaymen's Union and the Boatmen's Union. You must not permit a Government, bearing the name of a Labour Government, to aid feudal reaction and the merchant capitalist counter-revolution for the purpose of securing easier profits for the British bankers and colonisers. . . ."¹

On October 3, the *Workers' Weekly* published a telegram that had been addressed to Ramsay MacDonald by Sun Yat-sen, as early as September 1,² informing him of the rebellion fermented by the Hong Kong-Shanghai Banking Corporation and of the threats of the British Consul-General. "I am obliged to infer," the telegram concluded, "that the real aim of this ultimatum is the overthrow of my Government. I protest most energetically against the final act of imperialist intervention in the internal affairs of China." Ramsay MacDonald, who had never hesitated to cry out aloud in support of the Mensheviks of Georgia, had found, for Dr. Sun Yat-sen's protest, nothing but silence and suppression.

STRUGGLE AGAINST MILITARISM AND WAR

The character of the general world situation and of the foreign policy of the Labour Government put a particularly heavy responsibility on the shoulders of the Communist Party to raise the understanding of the British people of the danger of being involved in aggressive war. It was not enough to campaign against particular aspects of reactionary policy—the Dawes Plan, bondholders' demands on Russia, "Hands Off China", against the military expenditure—the Party felt the need for a *general* campaign on the issue of peace or war.

On the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, the British Party organised, in conjunction with other Communist Parties throughout the world, a week of campaigning against war—from July 27 to August 4, 1924.³ Meetings and rallies were held all over the

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., October 3, 1924, p. 3.

³ See *ibid.*, July 11, July 18, July 25, August 1, August 8, 1924.

country—in London, Scotland and Lancashire particularly. Some 5,000 workers rallied to an anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square on Sunday, July 27. By arrangement with the French and German Communist Parties, prominent French and German Communists toured Britain, whilst Joe Vaughan and Mrs. Robertson (of Barrow) were sent by the British Party on speaking tours against war in France and Germany.

An important aspect of the Communist Party's anti-war campaign was the direct appeal made to the workers in the armed forces. An appeal was made in the *Workers' Weekly* of July 25¹ (the basis of the so-called Campbell Case which we shall examine later). A special supplement of the August 11 issue of the *Workers' Weekly* was completely devoted to "The Forces".² A strong call was made to the men in the Army, Navy and Air Force to refuse to be used as blacklegs against their fellow workers in industry, and to refuse to use their arms against their own class. The main call *We Appeal to You* ended with these words:

"You are workers yourselves. Get ready to help your mates when they decide to throw over the war-makers and profiteers. And, above all, don't let yourself be used as blacklegs by the bosses! If the capitalists send you against strikers, don't shoot!"

The men in the forces were advised to find their own methods of organisation, to "form committees in your depots, and on your ships, in the barrack-rooms and at aerodromes". Efforts were made to see that the appeal reached the forces. At dawn for instance on August 9, the Aldershot and Farnborough (R.A.F.) barracks were found plastered with copies of the Special Forces supplement.³

In mid-September the Party made a further appeal to the labour movement to force the Labour Government to change its attitude on international affairs and to take up a position in defence of peace.⁴

It attacked the whole line of Labour foreign policy—the Dawes Plan, the intervention in China, the oppression in Egypt, in the Sudan and in Iraq, the voting of increased armaments. It called on the labour movement to take up:

"the struggle against war by uniting them [the workers] in the workshops on the basis of factory committees, by welding the unions

¹ See Appendix VI to this chapter.

² "The Forces", special supplement of *Workers' Weekly*, August 1, 1924.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, August 15, 1924.

⁴ "Is Labour Against War?", in *Workers' Weekly*, September 19, 1924.

together into industrial unions, by creating a real fighting general staff, by breaking with the policy of class co-operation. . . .

"War must be fought in Britain now by the Labour Movement forcing the Labour Government to undertake an active struggle against Imperialism and capitalism on every front."

It was, alas, too late. By that time the Labour Government had created the conditions for its own inevitable defeat.

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

On no international issue was it so clear that there were *two opposing* approaches for the Labour Government as on their attitude to the Empire or, more specifically, to the struggle of the colonial peoples of the British Empire for national independence. There were *two* approaches, one reformist and one revolutionary; one that involved "continuity" of the policy of imperialist domination and exploitation and the other that meant, both in theory and practice, full support for the national liberation struggle of the peoples of the British Empire, full acceptance of their right of self-determination. The first, reformist, approach was that of the Labour Government throughout the months of its existence; the second, revolutionary, approach was taken by the British Communist Party, nor were they without allies in sections of the British labour movement.

On this issue of Empire it was not, as so often, a question of the right-wing leadership of Labour Government and Party breaking in practice progressive pledges and promises made in electoral programmes or pre-election speeches. On the contrary, the right-wing of the Labour Party had long stood quite openly for the maintenance of the British Empire by whatever force might be necessary. Far from preaching the end of the Empire, they rejoiced, revelled, gloried in its continuation. They identified themselves with the imperialists. It was "*our*" Empire all along the line.

MacDonald, with his customary verbosity, had summarised the reformist attitude:

"One fifth of the earth and one fifth of the folk are ours . . . every race, creed, colour, civilisation obey our rule and it is only when one has seen the endless variety of humanity and clime that lies beneath our flag that one has a glimmering of what the British Empire means.

... Figures minimise rather than exaggerate the wonderful nature of our dominions. . . .¹

The "sacred trust of Empire" was handed to them by their Tory predecessors; to that trust they would be "true". Or in the words of the Labour Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Rt. Hon. J. H. Thomas:

"He hoped it would be realised, when the time came for them to give up the seals of office, that they had not only been mindful of their responsibility, but had done nothing to weaken the position and prestige of this great Empire."²

Or again, a few months later, Thomas repeated that the Labour Government:

"intended above all else to hand to their successors one thing when they gave up the seals of office and that was the general recognition of the fact that they were proud and jealous of, and were prepared to maintain the Empire."³

If it were true, in general, that the composition of the Labour Government was overwhelmingly right-wing, it was *particularly* true of every post and position concerned with Empire.⁴ MacDonald as Prime Minister, Lord Haldane as Lord Chancellor, J. H. Thomas as Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Oliver (former Colonial Governor) as Secretary of State for India, Viscount Chelmsford (former Viceroy of India), made up a team that guaranteed "continuity" of imperial policy. The capitalist press acknowledged this, and did not hesitate to express their feeling of security. The Empire was, in their opinion, quite safe in its new hands. After a speech on the British Empire by Ramsay MacDonald, *The Times* purred:

"of the British Empire Mr. MacDonald used words to which no Conservative could find exception. . . . He affirmed his belief in it, and that in which men affirm their belief they are ready to defend. The British Empire stands on its merits, and it is the business of that Conservatism to which Mr. MacDonald belongs to allow nothing to threaten or impair its strength. . . ."⁵

¹ J. Ramsay MacDonald, *Labour and Empire*.

² J. H. Thomas, February 28, 1924, quoted in *Workers' Weekly*, March 7, 1924.

³ *The Times*, May 16, 1924.

⁴ See R. Palme Dutt, "Empire and War" in *Workers' Weekly*, March 7, 1924.

⁵ *The Times*, March 3, 1924.

In the new Colonial Minister *The Times* found:

"an Imperial spirit which was at once earnest, cordial and imbued with a sense of deep responsibility."¹

The opposite, revolutionary, approach to the issue of Empire was only expressed in a clear unqualified form by the Communist Party. This attitude was best summarised in the Resolution passed by the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party, held at a time (May 16-18, 1924) when the position of the Labour Government towards the Empire had already been made abundantly clear.

The Communist Party stood for the right of self-determination of the colonial peoples of the British Empire, for their full right to secession and independence. But this was not seen as the end of the matter. Colonial freedom was not looked on as an abstract "academic" right. It was considered the duty of the militant and revolutionary sections of the British working class and working people to show active solidarity, in action as well as resolution, with the liberation struggle of the colonial people. The Resolution declared:²

"... it is of the utmost importance that our struggle should be linked up with that of the workers in these colonies and Crown Dominions. ... We have a duty to assist directly and indirectly in the struggles of the workers in the Colonies and Crown Dominions. ..."

There was a common interest in a united struggle against a common enemy—British imperialism:

"The continued enslavement of the colonial peoples makes our own freedom in this country absolutely impossible ... it is necessary in the interests of our own struggle that assistance should be rendered to the workers in the colonies ..."

"This Congress, therefore, renews its pledges of solidarity with the struggling colonial workers, and promises the fullest possible assistance in the development of their struggle for freedom."

This was June 1924. Labour imperialist policy was already in operation. The Party Congress, therefore, recorded its protest:

"This Government has, since its accession, not only allowed, but actually excused and condoned the shooting down and massacre of colonial workers. Thousands of workers are in gaol in Egypt and

¹ *Ibid.*, June 19, 1924.

² *Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*, pp. 42-43.

India, and the Labour Government does nothing. Not only that, the Labour Government actually initiates the persecution of the pioneers of Communism in India and Egypt. . . . The Congress sends its fraternal greetings to these workers in gaol, and struggling to set up a working class movement in the colonies, and pledges itself to render every possible assistance to their work."

Always a touchstone in attitude to Empire was the position of India. "Regarding India," wrote Richard W. Lyman, American historian, in his study of the first Labour Government,¹ "the Labour Government's policy was not easy to distinguish from that of the Tories." One of MacDonald's first acts, before he had even assumed office, was to despatch a personal cable to the Indian nationalists warning, in no uncertain terms, that "no Party in Great Britain will be cowed by threats of force or by politics designed to bring the Government to a standstill."²

A new factor, meanwhile, was arising in Indian politics.³ For the first time, in the early 1920's, the working class was emerging as an independent political force, giving a decisive impetus, though not yet leadership, to the struggle for national independence, conducting its struggle with the greatest energy and courage. A working-class ideology, the ideas of Marxism, began to spread in India, influencing sections of the working class, of the youth (particularly students), and a left wing of the Indian national movement. From 1920 onwards, the Communist Party of India, still very weak in these early years, began to distribute Marxist literature. From 1924, a Marxist journal, *The Socialist*, was edited from Bombay by S. A. Dange.⁴

This emergence of an independent political working-class movement and the rudiments of a Communist Party spelt double danger to British imperialism. Immediate suppression was called for, and what more suitable instrument to implement this than the newly formed Labour Government? No time was lost. The Government proceeded to stage a *political* trial—the notorious Cawnpore trial—against eight of the early Indian Communist leaders, including Dange, Shauhat Usmani, Muzaffer Ahmed and Das Gupta, who were arrested in India,

¹ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

² See R. Palme Dutt, "Empire and War" in *Workers' Weekly*, March 7, 1924; Bert Williams, *op. cit.*; Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

³ R. Palme Dutt, *India Today* (Gollancz, 1940), p. 321.

⁴ R. Palme Dutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 372-373.

and M. N. Roy, who was then abroad.¹ The accused were charged with attempting "to use the workers' and peasants' associations to secure the complete separation of India from Great Britain, with such an economic programme as could easily appeal to ignorant people", and with conspiring "to organise a working-class party in India, and so deprive the King of his Sovereignty"—interesting reflection on the capitalist conception of freedom. To avoid the glare of public pressure and opinion, the case was filed in an obscure District Court. All prosecution witnesses, with one exception, were police or Government hirelings, and the one "exception" was challenged by the Defence Counsel as a police spy. The only real evidence, and that was the real crime, was that the accused were Communists. The four main accused in India—Dange, Das Gupta, Usmani and Muzaffer Ahmed, were each sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

The British Communist Party at once challenged the attitude of the Labour Government. A Defence Fund was established with the help of George Lansbury and James Maxton.² A call for solidarity was made:³

"The Cawnpore trial . . . on a charge of 'conspiracy', following immediately on the Bombay shooting of textile workers, is a danger signal that should awaken the whole British movement. . . ."⁴

The Party saw very clearly the immense significance for Britain and for the whole of Asia of this emergence, small though it still was, of an independent *working-class* political movement in India:

"What does the awakening of the Indian workers mean to the British workers? It means the greatest hope in the development of the international working class, the dawning of the hour when the Asiatic workers arise to take their place by the side of their brothers in Europe, the hour which sounds the knell of imperialist exploitation and inequality throughout the world, that hour which Keir Hardie and William Morris and all the founders of the movement would have given their right hands to see. . . ."⁵

They called for the *same* rights for the Indian working class that the

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, March 28, 1924, editorial, "Hands off the Indian Workers". See also *Workers' Weekly*, March 21, 1924, "Communist Diary"; and *Communist Review*, July 1924, article by M. N. Roy, "British Rule in India".

² *Workers' Weekly*, April 25, 1924, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, March 28, 1924, editorial, "Hands off the Indian Workers".

⁴ *Ibid.* ⁵ *Ibid.*

British working class, after decades of struggle, had won for themselves:

“... Demand equal rights for our Indian brothers, that they should have the same rights of labour and socialist propaganda that we hold in this country.”¹

The British Party, at the same time, appealed to the working people of India to make a clear distinction between British imperialism and the right-wing reformists that defended it, on the one hand, and the militant anti-imperialist section of the British working class:

“Workers and peasants of India! The British Communist workers hold out their hands to you in comradeship and declare. . . . ‘Do not mistake the countenances of a Haldane or an Olivier for the British working class. Our struggle and your struggle is one. . . . The British Communist Party . . . stands for the complete liberation of the Indian masses from British rule. . . .’”²

The voice of the British Communist Party was as yet a small voice, but the message that it carried was clear and of immense importance for the future relations of the peoples of Britain and of India.

If India was the touchstone of the Government’s attitude to Empire, there was no lack of other issues in other areas to test the “consistency” of the Labour-imperialist approach.

Within six months of Labour’s assumption of office, Iraqi tribal villages were being subjected to aerial bombardment on the instructions of Lord, formerly Brigadier-General, Manson, the Labour Secretary of State for Air.³ The justification made has become something of a grim classic. Early in July, George Lansbury, who like a number of militant Labour Party and I.L.P. members had raised his voice, alongside the Communist Party, in protest against this colonialist conduct, demanded an explanation in the House of Commons from Mr. Leach, the Under-Secretary for Air:⁴

“*Mr. Lansbury asked:* On how many occasions during the past five months has the Air Force been engaged in Iraq or other places

¹ Ibid. See also “Appeal of the Communist International on the Cawnpore Trial”, in *Workers’ Weekly*, May 9, 1924, p. 3: “Workers of Great Britain! . . . Is there any conceivable reason why the Indian workers should be deprived of the rights you possess in Great Britain?”

² R. Palme Dutt in *Workers’ Weekly*, March 7, 1921.

³ See *Workers’ Weekly*, June 20, July 4, July 11, 1924, also Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁴ Hansard, July 3, 1924.

bombing independent villages or townships and whether any notice, and if so what length of notice, is given to the civilian population, women and children, and men to withdraw before the bombing commences?"

"*Mr. Leach*: Bombs have been dropped on five occasions in Iraq during the period referred to, and in all cases except one not less than two days warning was given. . . . My Hon. Friend will realise that in areas where violence is habitual, air action, however regrettable the necessity for it, in many cases checks at an early stage disturbances which would otherwise cause a great loss of life."

Only a few days earlier the same Mr. Leach had candidly and correctly replied to a question in the House from Sir Samuel Hoare, who enquired whether Labour's policy in Iraq was not identical with that of the previous Tory Government: "I cannot honestly say we have made any change in the policy of the late Government."¹

Egypt was a similar story. One of the earliest acts of the MacDonald Government was to proclaim its support for the decision of the Lloyd George Government, two years previous, to maintain British garrisons in that country.² The Government voted millions to the Sudan Syndicate, a big capitalist cotton concern paying a 25 per cent dividend.³ When national revolt threatened in the Sudan, the Labour Government, in the best Tory tradition, despatched troops and cruisers.⁴

In April 1924, the workers—Indian and Negro—of Georgetown in British Guiana, went on strike for higher wages. They were shot at by British troops; twelve lost their lives, and many more were wounded.⁵

A typical example of Labour imperialism was the attitude of the Colonial Secretary, J. H. Thomas, to the white settlers of the British dominions and colonies in Africa. "I was given," wrote Thomas, in his *Autobiography*:⁶

"the inestimable privilege of paying a visit to South Africa. I went as Chairman of the Empire Parliamentary Association. . . . Of all the

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, July 4, 1924, "Communist Diary" on p. 2, reporting session in House of Commons of June 30, 1924.

² *Ibid.*, March 7, 1924.

³ *Ibid.* See also Bert Williams, *op. cit.*, and T. A. Jackson, "The Sudan Scandal", in *Communist Review*, September 1924.

⁴ See *Manchester Guardian*, August 14 and 15, 1924, and *Workers' Weekly*, August 22, p. 3.

⁵ Bert Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

⁶ J. H. Thomas, *My Story*, Hutchinson, 1937, pp. 78, 81.

tasks that face a Colonial Secretary or Dominions Minister, none is more difficult than that of holding evenly the balance in many of our tropical dependencies between the white and black. We have to bear in mind that the white settler plays a major part in the development of our colonies and must accept grave risks and responsibilities. He is a pioneer in every sense of the word, working (to my personal knowledge) under difficulties that very few of us can realise, and faced with dangers that require inexhaustible courage. Often the white settlers are a mere handful among thousands of natives. . . .

"A proud boast of the British is that they have no equals as colonisers: I think it is true.

"... there is no more important task confronting the white man in Africa than that of conveying to the blacks a feeling that justice and fair play may be relied on, and above all, that the whites' moral conduct is above reproach. With very few exceptions this high standard has been maintained. . . ."

Kenya, declared Thomas on another occasion, was held as "a trust for the natives",¹ and Mr. Ormsby Gore, his Tory predecessor as Colonial Minister, applauded and expressed his approval.

At the Berne Conference of the Second International, in February 1919, MacDonald had declared that though Cyprus was required by Great Britain, for strategic purposes, to protect the commercial route to the East, the British delegates were:

"to support a proposal to apply the principle of self-determination to the island, specially upon the establishment of a League of Nations."²

On April 4, 1924, in the House of Commons, the same MacDonald, now in office, declared that:

"His Majesty's Government are not contemplating any change in the political status of Cyprus."³

The imperialist record of the Government was consistent from the very first to the very last days of office. Some ten days before the General Election (October 9, 1924) that was to terminate its functions, the Government authorised a series of arrests of national leaders in Burma.⁴ The final fling, in the final week of office, was the inauguration

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, March 7, 1924.

² See *ibid.*, February 29, 1924, p. 3, and Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

³ See *ibid.*, June 20, 1924, p. 5, and Bert Williams, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 24, 1924.

by the Indian Government, with the authority of the MacDonald Government, of the ruthless Bengal Special Ordinances.¹ Under these Ordinances trial by jury was suspended (trials henceforth to be conducted by three "extraordinary" commissions), and all the main nationalist leaders of Bengal province were arrested.

The action, claimed Sidney Webb, against the "Swarajists" was as firm as action against agitators and unofficial strike leaders in Britain.²

"When Lord Reading, constantly pressed by Lord Lytton as Governor of Bengal, at last asked sanction for strong measures of coercion to prevent crimes of violence on Government officials, some of which were occurring, there were no two opinions in the cabinet about the necessity of sanctioning all possible measures of prevention of crime, including the most arbitrary powers of indefinite internment or imprisonment by executive order, without specific accusation, trial or judicial sentence."

Considerable trouble was taken by Lord Olivier (Secretary of State for India) and the India Committee, Sidney Webb recounts, "to cut out of the proposed Ordinance all expressions directed against political movements and associations, and all reference to sedition or political offences". But if the form of *words* was discarded, the essence of repressive policy remained:

"... whilst insisting on this distinction [*sic!*] . . . the Indian Committee, with unanimous cabinet approval, did not hesitate in arming the Indian Government with the fullest powers for the prevention, at whatever sacrifice of individual liberty, of actual violence. And we did this fully conscious that Lansbury and his section of the Labour Party would strongly object to it, and would not spare the Labour Government in denunciation."³

The Bengal Ordinances were strongly resisted by the Communist Party along with an important section of the Labour Party and I.L.P. But their enactment coincided with the end of the Labour Government, which by this time had fulfilled the role which British imperialism had set it.

¹ R. Palme Dutt, *Modern India*, C.P., 1927, and *Workers' Weekly*, October 31, 1924, p. 4.

² Sidney Webb, *The First Labour Government* (written after the fall of the Government, but first published in *Political Quarterly* of January-March 1961).

³ *Ibid.*

The epitaph was perhaps composed by J. R. Clynes. It has often been said, he wrote, that British Labour is a disrupting influence in the Empire, but on the contrary:

"In the same period of years, no Conservative or Liberal Government has done more than we did to knit together the great Commonwealth of Nations which Britain calls her Empire. . . . Far from wanting to lose our colonies, we are trying to keep them."¹

The Government's policy had been throughout indistinguishable on the issue of Empire from that of its Tory predecessors. Its theory of "continuity" was even more consistent, if that be possible, than on other aspects of international affairs. This was perhaps inevitable. It was on the basis of Britain's imperial position that reformism had become so strong in Britain, exerting so dominating and so deadening an influence on the British labour movement; and British reformism, from the first, defended imperialism.

On this whole issue there was, in the course of the months of office, considerable opposition to Labour imperialist policy from Labour M.P.s like George Lansbury, and from local sections of the Labour Party, I.L.P. and trade union movement. But the most consistent, principled opposition came from the Communist Party, and this had a significance well beyond the confines of Britain herself. For if the Government's policy profoundly disillusioned the broadly-based national liberation movement in India and other parts of what MacDonald loved to call the "far-flung Empire", the first real alliance began to be built up between the colonial peoples fighting for independence and the militant workers in Britain. At the heart of this alliance, that was to grow out of all recognition in later years, was the Communist Party, which, it might well be said, saved the honour of the British people.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE LABOUR PARTY

The months of the first Labour Government were, inevitably, a complex and difficult period for Communist Party-Labour Party relations. The Communist Party, as we have seen, had urged Labour to take office on the basis of a definite programme of militant action in the interests of the working class. The purpose of such a Labour Government, in the Communist view, would be to win support from the

¹ Rt. Hon. J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, 1924-1937, Hutchinson, pp. 54-55.

workers whilst preparing for a fresh challenge at a new General Election.

But from the first the Party had warned that a Labour Government following a policy of class-collaboration would, without doubt, lead to defeat and disaster. Already, in February 1924, it had declared that the reformist leaders, now firmly ensconced in all the key positions of the Government, were preparing betrayal, and that only the concerted and continuous pressure of all the militant sections of the labour movement could force them back to a more progressive policy.

Month by month, in act after act, on the home, colonial and international fronts, the sell-out of the right-wing Labour leaders, who formed the Government, became more and more blatant. The Communist Party, therefore, had to pursue the extremely difficult tactic of carrying out, on the one hand, a principled critique of reformism whilst striving, on the other, to develop the broadest Labour unity to force the Labour Government to adopt a more militant course of action.

Inside the Labour Party and trade union movement, criticism of and protest at MacDonaldism were increasing. But the protests were spasmodic, unorganised, and not, for the most part, based on any principled understanding of reformism. Often they were more of a personal than a political character. In this situation the role of the Communist Party was of especial importance. The working class needed the Party as a rallying militant centre inside the labour movement and, so far as possible, inside the Labour Party, which otherwise would be left to the tender mercy of the right wing. The Communist Party, therefore, had to continue its fight for affiliation to the Labour Party and for the same rights within the Labour Party as were enjoyed by other trends and tendencies, whilst it more and more decisively criticised the right-wing Labour leaders.

As for the right-wing leaders—the MacDonalds, Hendersons, Thomases, etc.—the more openly they betrayed the aims of the labour movement and the constitution of the Labour Party, the more they turned against the Communists, whom they saw as the leaders of the militant opposition to reformism. The more they collaborated with capitalism, the more anti-Communist they became, the more they became determined at all cost to remove the Communists from *all* positions inside the Labour Party.

By April 1924 the Government's abandonment of working-class interests in all spheres—home, foreign, colonial—was becoming only too apparent. Towards the end of the month, the Communist Party

Executive issued a Manifesto—*Future of the Labour Government—A Call to All Workers*.¹ The Manifesto contrasted the policy which the situation demanded from the Labour Government with the one which was, in fact, being carried out:

“The Labour Government is in existence at a time when the workers are in a state of revolt against the intolerable conditions imposed upon them during the last three years. Yet instead of the Labour Government openly taking the side of the workers, and using the whole resources of government on their behalf, they have already threatened on two occasions . . . to use the forces of the state against the workers. . . .

“ . . . In every direction the Labour Government has shown itself the servant of the bourgeoisie . . . Labour Cabinet Ministers have become the missionaries of a new imperialism. They brag of the glory of Empire. Armaments and coercion have become commonplace with them.”

The Manifesto warned that the Government, left to its own devices and as at present composed, would never fulfil the expectations of those who had elected it. It called for united Labour pressure:

“ . . . it is more than ever necessary that in all sections of the working class movement a strong and united effort should be made to compel them to operate their own promises and pledges.”

Once again the Party put forward a militant programme around which the labour movement could rally and press for its implementation by the Government. The programme included an all-round increase in wages by £1 per week; a maximum 44-hour week; employment for all at trade union rates and, until this was provided, full maintenance; no evictions of unemployed workers; full political rights for soldiers and sailors, including the right to refuse to blackleg during industrial disputes; full industrial and political freedom for Indian and Egyptian workers and peasants; withdrawal of all claims against Soviet Russia, conclusion of an economic treaty with Russia and granting of credits to the Soviet Government. The Party called for unity of all sections of the labour movement for struggle around these general demands.

In May, the Sixth Congress of the C.P.G.B. devoted a substantial part of its time to clarifying the Communist attitude to the Labour

¹ Issued on April 23, 1924, printed in *Workers' Weekly*, April 25, 1924, p. 1.

Party and the Labour Government. The right wing were accusing the Party of seeking to disrupt or to destroy the Labour Party. This was the oft-repeated cry of men like MacDonald, Hodges or Thomas. But this was the opposite, precisely, of the truth. William Gallacher, as Chairman of the Congress, gave the answer in his opening remarks:¹

“The Communist Party does not attack the Labour Party. The Communist Party strives all the time to make the Labour Party a useful organ of the workers in the struggle against capitalism, but we do attack the leadership of the Labour Party, and will go on attacking it until the labour movement has forced it, either to prosecute a working-class policy or to make way for a leadership that will do so. . . .”

A fuller analysis of the whole question was developed in the *Resolution on Relations With the Labour Party*,² adopted, after discussion, by the Congress. The Resolution described how the Labour Party had been founded as a federation, a “common association” of working-class organisations:

“Besides the great trade unions, it included political organisations, such as the I.L.P., Fabian Socialists and such like organisations. Its composition made it essentially a party of the working masses, and, notwithstanding the middle class ideology of its leadership and the treachery of its policy, large sections of the workers still look upon the Labour Party as the mass Parliamentary Party of the working class, organised as a complementary movement to the trade unions, and having for its ultimate object the ending of the exploitation of the workers.”

It attacked the conception of “parliamentarianism” of the right-wing leaders:

“... the Parliamentary policy of the present leadership of the Labour Party is a policy of strengthening the structure of capitalist society and not fighting the capitalism system.”

In this connection the Resolution strongly criticised the role of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.), which provided the Labour Party both with its principal right-wing leaders and helped it to dress up its unprincipled class-collaboration ideology. (Indeed the I.L.P. at this

¹ *Report of 6th Congress of the C.P.G.B.*, Salford, Manchester, May 16-18, 1924, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

time claimed two-thirds of the membership of the Parliamentary Labour Party.) The meeting of the Central Committee which followed the Party's Sixth Congress discussed more in detail the position of the I.L.P., which by then had shed much of its militant traditions, and adopted a statement characterising it:

"as an organisation defending capitalism, and using its traditional past to prevent the growth of a revolutionary movement, and to attach the working class to the whole capitalist imperialist state."¹

The Sixth Congress Resolution reaffirmed the decision of the Communist Party to apply for affiliation to the Labour Party. Its attacks would be directed *not* against the Labour Party, but against the right-wing leaders whose policy and practice were, in fact, disrupting it:

"The Communist Party will at all times energetically oppose the policy of the Lib-Lab elements, i.e. the treacherous middle class leadership and the 'collaboration of the classes' policy of the I.L.P., and strive to give the working class a fighting policy based upon the class struggle."

The fight for affiliation to the Labour Party had, in fact, never been relaxed, and had been progressing throughout the successive months of the Labour Government. As we have seen, the Edinburgh (1922) Conference of the Labour Party had not only rejected affiliation, but introduced certain amendments to the Constitution of the Labour Party, the effect of which was to challenge hitherto undisputed rights of Communists, locally and nationally, within the Labour Party. In particular they denied the right of trade unions to delegate Communists as their representatives at Labour Party Conferences and called upon local Labour Parties to exclude from their ranks Communists who had been properly accredited as representatives of affiliated trade union branches. So great had been the protests amongst both trade unions and local Labour Parties, that the whole position came up for reconsideration at the following (1923) Labour Party Conference, and there the discriminatory Clause (b) of the Edinburgh amendments was lifted, leaving only Clause (a) which insisted that every person elected as delegate should "individually accept the Constitution and principles of the Labour Party". This was an important progressive victory, but it soon became clear that influential circles inside the Labour Party were

¹ Resolution adopted at the meeting of the Central Committee of the C.P.G.B. at its Session of May 24-25, 1924, published in *Workers' Weekly*, May 30, 1924.

by no means content "to rely solely upon Clause (a)". Finally, under renewed pressure from trade unions and local Labour Parties, "an official communiqué was issued by the Labour Party Executive Committee, in which the right of the trade unions to appoint Communists as delegates was finally and unequivocally made clear."¹

This still left unsettled the general problem of Communist Party affiliation and the particular issue of Communists selected to stand as Parliamentary Candidates under Labour Party auspices, and the latter question came to the fore in the 1923 General Election, when a number of Communists, endorsed locally as Labour Party candidates, were refused official national endorsement.

It was to try to regulate this last question of Parliamentary candidates that the Communist Party addressed itself to the Labour Party Executive in a letter of December 22, 1923, asking for joint discussions.

On January 10, 1924, Arthur Henderson, as Secretary of the Labour Party, replied to the Communist Party that the question had been put before the Labour Party Executive on January 8, and the letter had been remitted to the Sub-Committee of the Executive that had previously met a Communist deputation, but with the addition of Ramsay MacDonald. "So soon as the Parliamentary situation has settled down," wrote Henderson, "the Sub-Committee will receive a Communist Party deputation."²

The Communist Party Central Committee appointed a deputation of Thomas Bell, Mrs. Helen Crawford, R. Palme Dutt, W. Gallacher, Albert Inkpin, Arthur MacManus and J. T. Murphy³ and, having received no reply, wrote again on March 5, pressing for reception of the deputation.

The Communist Party deputation was not in fact received until August.⁴ Albert Inkpin, as the Communist spokesman, having recapitulated the previous negotiations, turned once again to the issue of affiliation:

"The Communist Party can never forgo its claim, as a bona fide working-class political organisation, to be accepted as an affiliated body of the Labour Party; and its members, either individually or collectively, as members of the Labour Party through their industrial

¹ From C.P. statement made by A. Inkpin at meeting of Communist delegation at Labour Party Sub-Committee, published in *Workers' Weekly*, August 15, 1924, p. 4.

² *Report of 6th Congress of C.P.G.B.*, pp. 68-69.

³ Letter of Albert Inkpin to Arthur Henderson.

⁴ I have not been able to find the date of the meeting, but *Workers' Weekly* of August 15 refers to the "recent" meeting.

organisations; and can never forgo their right to strive with all their power to secure that end.

"The Communist Party accepts the Constitution of the Labour Party and, if admitted to affiliation, will abide loyally by that Constitution. It does not deny that it is critical of much of the policy and many of the tactics of the present leadership of the Labour Party, in the same way that many influential elements already in the Labour Party are critical of that leadership, and that many of those same leaders were critical of the leadership of the Labour Party during the war.

"It does not, however, ask more than the right of criticism on policy and tactics that is exercised in common by all affiliated bodies, and the same measure of freedom to advocate such changes in policy and tactics as it believes will advance the cause of the working class."¹

By this time, however, the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party was heavily engaged in the endeavour to turn against the Communists the critics of their own governmental misdeeds. Protests against successive surrenders to capitalism were mounting inside the Labour and trade union movement, and the right-wing leaders saw the Communist Party not only as the most consistent of the critics, but the only one of them that offered an alternative militant policy that could rally the left. It was necessary for them at all costs not only to maintain the ban on Communist affiliation, but to complete the process of exclusion of revolutionaries from their rightful position inside the labour movement.

Following the reception, therefore, of the Communist Party deputation, the Labour Party Executive submitted to the forthcoming Annual Conference the two recommendations:

- "(1) That the application for affiliation from the Communist Party be refused.
- "(2) That no member of the Communist Party be eligible for endorsement as a Labour candidate for Parliament or any local authority."²

In justification of these propositions all the hoary old arguments and slanders were resurrected and repeated. The Labour Party, they

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, August 15, 1924, p. 4.

² Report of the Executive Committee, 1923-24, in *Report of the 24th Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, pp. 38-40.

claimed, "seeks to achieve the Socialist Commonwealth by means of Parliamentary democracy . . . the Communist Party seeks to achieve the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' by armed insurrection".¹

That the Labour Party had been founded precisely as a federation in which revolutionary *and* reformist socialists could unite on a common limited programme with the trade union organisations, was, of course, an embarrassment to the right wing. That the old S.D.F. and later the British Socialist Party had been affiliated was something that, so far as possible, they tried to conceal. But it was necessary to go further, to distort the whole Marxist conception of socialist revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Labour Party Executive proclaimed that:

"... the Communist Party believes that Parliament and other Administrative Authorities are simply machines that should only be exploited to their own destruction; that there is no hope in the masses of the people rising to the heights of their political responsibilities; and that, therefore, so soon as a minority in the community feel that they are sufficiently powerful to revolutionise the present political and industrial system, they are justified in using power, armed and otherwise, to achieve that purpose. Pending the speedy conversion of the masses, should they disagree with this procedure, the correct position is that they should be held down by force, deprived of liberty of speech, organisation and press and such expressions in the direction of freedom of opinion will be dealt with as counter-revolutionary symptoms. . . ."

"The Labour Party holds a fundamental objection to tyranny quite apart from the social, political and industrial standing of the tyrant."

The Labour Party "justification" of course, completely distorted the fundamental Communist attitude to the state, to Parliament, to socialist revolution and to the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Marxist conception of the contemporary British state as an instrument of capitalist class power was completely concealed and replaced by a warped version of the Communist attitude to Parliament. The Communist conception of a socialist revolution as a mass struggle for political power by the majority of the people led by the industrial working class, was served up as a minority political putsch.

And the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the rule

¹ *Ibid.*

of the mass of the working people led by the working class, in which the power of the majority is used to defend the revolution from the minority of capitalists at home and their allies abroad, and to lead the whole mass of the people forward to socialism, was transformed by the Labour Executive into a minority dictatorship of the type that exists under capitalism. Having erected, by a process of utter distortion, an Aunt Sally of "Communist aims", the Executive then proceeded to knock it down again, and to conclude that it was necessary to reject Communist affiliation and refuse individual Communists the right to stand as Communist candidates. They did, however, make the proposition, interesting to posterity, that:

"if there are trade unions and local parties who desire to run and finance Communist members as Candidates, no action on the part of the Party Executive Committee will prevent them doing so."¹

When the Labour Party Twenty-fourth Annual Conference opened at the Queen's Hall, London, on October 7, it rapidly became clear that MacDonald and the right-wing leadership intended to make anti-Communism a central theme of the conference and, as far as possible, to make the Communists the scapegoats for their own misdeeds. The Conference was quite openly a pre-election Conference, and the right-wing reply to the Tory attacks was to show that, far from favouring Communism, they could be trusted, even more than the Tories, to pursue a consistent anti-Communist policy.

MacDonald himself set the tone in the Presidential Address at the opening morning session of October 7.² Communism, he proclaimed,

"as we know it, has nothing practical in common with us. It is a product of Czarism and war mentality, and, as such, we have nothing in common with it."

The Conference quickly proceeded to debate the Executive recommendations against the acceptance of affiliation and of Communists as Labour Party candidates at national and local elections. To this they adjoined and supported a Resolution of the Sutton District Labour Party "that no member of the Communist Party be eligible for

¹ Ibid. The significance of this proposition should be underlined. The Communist Party always wanted joint discussions to *prevent* a conflict of candidates. The Labour Party replies "No, run your candidates independently". When the Communist Party does so, the Labour Party makes this a ground for attack and proscription.

² *Report of 24th Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, pp. 106-111.

membership of the Labour Party.”¹ By a ruling from the Chair, the Executive recommendations and the Sutton resolution were taken together.

The line-up of speakers was Frank Hodges, M.P. (formally seconded by J. D. French of the Typographical Association) for the Executive; supported by V. L. McEntee of Walthamstow, G. A. Spencer, M.P. (Miners’ Federation, later to become the promoter of the notorious Spencer Unions, company unions organised when the miners were in the midst of desperate struggle and at the height of their suffering in the latter part of 1926), Councillor Allan Gordon (Brighton Labour Party) and Herbert Morrison winding up their case. Opposition to the Executive was opened by William Paul, leading Communist and member of the Rusholme Labour Party, supported by Alex Gossip (Furnishing Trades), and Harry Pollitt (present as delegate of the Boilermakers’ Union), with Shapurji Saklatvala (St. Pancras Labour Party and Trades Council) winding up their case. Jack Jones, M.P. (Silvertown) sat on the fence (“let the Communists come in on *our* terms”).

Once again all the old slanders were blatantly expounded. The Communists, argued Hodges, stood against the Labour ideal of Parliamentary democracy. For the Labour Party all that was necessary was victory at a General Election:

“At a given moment, when the electors of this country willed any change, the instrument was at hand through which they would express that change. And their progress, their electoral progress, depended upon the quality of the general education amongst the people.”²

The Communist aim of socialist revolution, proclaimed Spencer, was incompatible with Labour Party methods and aims:

“It was a well-known fact that the line of demarcation between the Communist Party and the Labour Party today was simply that the Labour Party believed in Parliamentary action coupled with the activities of the trade union movement, whereas the Communist Party believed the moment would come when they would be able to use the organised force of Labour to force a revolution.”³

¹ The debate on this issue is in the *Report of the 24th Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, pp. 123-131.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

The Communists, declared Hodges, should carry out their propaganda outside the Labour Party. They should "go out into the wilderness and carry on their campaign in the highways and byways . . . openly and honourably. . . ."¹

The Communists, argued Herbert Morrison, hopelessly exaggerated the power of the capitalist press. With the *Daily Herald*, Labour had "beaten the capitalist press". The Communist M.P.s would remain responsible to the Executive of the Communist Party.² The Communist Party was trying to split the Labour Movement. They had, for instance, attacked Ramsay MacDonald, the present Prime Minister, "a man of great Parliamentary ability whom all the Party honoured",³ at a by-election. The Communist aim was not to build the Labour Party, but they wanted to enter it

"for the purpose of putting sand into the machine and trying to destroy a great popular instrument which it had taken years of effort and years of sacrifice to build up."⁴

To all this mish-mash of reformist doctrine and anti-Communist distortion, the militant spokesmen, who were allowed by the Chairman to join the discussion, did their best to reply.

There was no contradiction, explained William Paul, between action *inside* Parliament and extra-parliamentary struggle: they complemented one another. The Communist Party was *not* anti-parliamentarian, it:

"believed that they must use every weapon to their hands to help the working class in their common struggle and, consequently, did not reject the Parliamentary weapon."⁵

It was the character of the capitalist state and the activity of the ruling class that made it impossible to depend on parliamentary action alone to advance to socialism. Even the present leaders of the Labour Party had been compelled, at times, to acknowledge this:

"There were at the platform, gentlemen and Rt. Hon. gentlemen who had helped to organise the Council of Action, which was an attempt to enforce the will of the working classes upon Mr. Lloyd George when all Parliamentary protests had failed in the House of Commons."⁶

The aim of the Communist Party, Paul explained, was not to weaken

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

or destroy the Labour Party. It would support every step and measure of the Labour Party directed against the capitalists:

"Every weapon in capitalism was loaded against the working classes and those who represented them, and, therefore, the Communist Party said frankly, 'We will fight loyally with you in the House on every particular point on which you are giving a lead to the working class.'"¹

Or, as Harry Pollitt expressed it:

"If in the House of Commons it was a fight for the capital levy or for the nationalisation of the mines, then the whole resources of the Communist Party would be on the side of the Labour Party."²

Speaking, as he said, with 43 years of experience of the trade union movement, Alex Gossip, the veteran leader of the Furnishing Trades workers, opposed the recommendations of the Labour Party Executive:

"He asked himself the question, was the Communist Party a Party representative of the working class, and working and fighting in their interests, or was it not?

"He came to the conclusion—the only possible conclusion that anyone could come to—that they were doing their duty according to their lights in helping to get rid of the capitalist system of society which was responsible for the degradation, the stupefaction, the misery, and the poverty of the class which they represented. If the Communists were doing that, and he thought they were, then he wanted to ask why, in the name of common sense, they should not take their hand."³

Surely, asked William Paul, if there were room in the Labour Party for

"the extreme pink tip of the right-wing [with] such men as Viscount Chelmsford and Lord Haldane, they could include Tom Mann, who had fought for the working classes all his life?"⁴

It was not the Communists but the right wing, argued Harry Pollitt, who were splitting the Labour Movement and the Labour Party. Hodge's speech, despite its polished phrases:

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.

² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

"was the first open step which certain leaders of the Labour Party were taking towards splitting the Labour movement in this country. . . . The people who were trying to frighten them with the bogey of the dictatorship of the working class were themselves exercising dictatorship."¹

The Communists, he continued, were to be cast out of the labour movement:

"not because there was anything wrong with them, but because they represented a growing alternative to the policy initiated by the gentlemen on the platform."²

When a card vote was taken, the rejection of Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party was carried by 3,185,000 votes to 193,000; the rejection of Communists as Labour candidates for Parliament or local authorities was carried by 2,456,000 to 654,000; and the resolution that no member of the Communist Party should be eligible for Labour Party membership was carried by the narrow majority of 1,804,000 to 1,540,000 votes.³

Up to the period of the first Labour Government, the members of the Communist Party were becoming, in a positive sense, increasingly active inside the Labour Party, urging and often leading local struggles against capitalism, winning the confidence of the mass of the Labour Party members as loyal and militant members of that Party and, in many cases, being elected to local leaderships.⁴

In many cases this had led to a toning down of political explanation of the Communist policy which was on several occasions criticised by the Political Bureau of the Party.⁵ With the assumption of office by the Labour Government, and a Government carefully selected from the most confirmed right-wingers and reformists, it was absolutely essential for the Communist Party to issue a stiff warning against its likely and disastrous course, and equally essential to criticise each successive action of betrayal. But at the time this criticism was regarded with extreme disfavour even by some of the more left-wing elements within the Labour Party, who *later* were to echo in their own words the very

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴ Political Report of Central Committee to Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B. (Glasgow, May 30–June 1, 1925), in *Report of Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B.*, pp. 131–132.

⁵ *Ibid.*

criticisms that the Communist Party made *at the time*.¹ As J. R. Campbell put it at the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party (Glasgow, May 30-June 1, 1925):

"When the Manchester Congress met and laid down its position with regard to the Labour Government, it was almost regarded as an act of political blasphemy for the Communist Party to criticise the many mistakes which that Government had made. People who previously had been left-wingers or even revolutionaries, as soon as the Labour Government came into office, immediately retired to their theoretical dug-outs and commenced sniping at the Communist Party for daring to criticise the Labour Government. Today we find a change has taken place; criticisms of the Labour Government are taking place in all sections of the Labour movement. Some of those who had, as members of the Communist Party, been amongst the most 'left-wing' critics of the Labour Party, were amongst those who resented criticism of the Labour Government now."²

As for the right wing, the more they retreated, the more they collaborated with capitalism, the more "the enemy" became for them, not capitalism, not imperialism, but the militant working class and, in particular, the Communists who led the movement of protest against the betrayal. British Toryism, in all its cunning, once it had won from the Labour Government the respite that it needed, began more and more vigorously to attack the Labour Government, which was carrying out (or "continuing") a capitalist policy, as "reds", "Communists", "agents of Soviet Russia", culminating in the "Campbell Case" and the notorious Zinoviev letter. The right-wing Labour reply was still further and more blatant attacks on the Communist Party. They saw in the Communist Party, as Harry Pollitt explained in his speech at the Labour Party Conference, "a growing alternative" to their own policy. The Communist representation locally and nationally inside the Labour Party was increasing. At the 1922 Edinburgh Labour Conference, for instance, six Communists had been elected as delegates.³ To the 1923 London Conference, thirty Communists were elected.⁴ At the 1924

¹ J. R. Campbell moving the Political Report in Report of Seventh (Glasgow) Congress, C.P.G.B., p. 24.

² For example at the 1922 Congress of the Communist Party Ellen Wilkinson criticised the Executive for not being strong enough in its attacks on the Labour Party, but resigned from the C.P. when it criticised the Labour Government in 1924.

³ Report of C.C. to Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B. in *Report*, pp. 68-69.

⁴ From Organising Report of C.C. to Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B. in *Report*, pp. 155-156.

Conference, despite all the right-wing pressure, there were still twenty-five Communists elected as Labour Party or trade union delegates.¹ There were over 20 resolutions demanding the acceptance of Communist affiliation sent in by local Labour Parties and Trades Councils to the 1924 Labour Party Conference.² At all costs—this was the right-wing attitude—the Communists must be totally excluded from the Labour Party and thus, so far as possible, isolated from the mass of the labour movement.

The Labour Party Conference was carried through in a worked-up, hysterical atmosphere of Tory attack, impending elections, and inevitable downfall, with the Communist Party as the scapegoat of the right-wing. Once again the non-Communist “left wing” critics were silent (or silenced):

“... in that atmosphere of hysteria, the left wing, outside the Communists who were present, completely disappeared, and left the Communist fraction at the Conference the only real opposition to MacDonaldism.”³

In this atmosphere the Labour Party Executive was able not only to hustle through its own reactionary recommendations against Communist affiliation and rights to stand as Labour Party candidates, but also to smuggle in the Sutton resolution against individual Communist membership of the Labour Party, which had been moved at a small meeting by an ex-Liberal who had only recently joined the Labour Party, and had already left it at the time of the London Conference.⁴ As usual the block vote concealed the real attitude within the Labour Party. In the miners’ delegation, the decision to vote against Communist Party affiliation was only carried by 74 votes to 52. Similar votes took place in a number of other delegations.⁵

As soon as the Conference was over the Communist Party returned to the fight. The decision of the Labour Party Conference, declared an editorial of the *Workers’ Weekly* of October 10:

“... must be challenged by the whole working-class movement. It

¹ From Political Report of C.C. to Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B. in *Report*, p. 132.

² J. R. Campbell moving Political Resolution at Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B. in *Report*, p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Political Report of C.C. to Eighth Congress of C.P.G.B. in *Report*, pp. 134–135.

⁵ J. R. Campbell, “The Servile Conference”, in *Communist Review*, Vol. 5, No. 7, November 1925, p. 318.

represents the victory of the right-wing leaders in their further efforts to Liberalise the Labour Party, and to make it still more subservient to the requirements of the capitalists."¹

At an open session of the Central Committee on the following day (October 11), it was agreed to work in every way to win trade unions and local Labour Parties to continue to elect Communists as local and national Labour Party delegates and to refuse to carry out the decision on individual membership. A strong and increasing response to this call began almost at once to take effect.

The battle continued.

PROBLEMS OF PARTY ORGANISATION

The Fifth (Battersea) Congress of the Communist Party, adopting in October 1922 the Report of the Special Commission, had laid down new principles not only for Party organisation but for the approaches to revolutionary work in general, and in particular the Party's relation to the mass movement.

It opened the way to transform the Party from one endowed with a revolutionary theory and general revolutionary policy into one which would combine these with a revolutionary form of organisation providing a living day-to-day leadership on all the immediate issues that faced the mass movement.

Following Battersea, as we have seen, a Special Organisation Committee was appointed to carry through the reorganisation of the Party.² In the course of some fifty meetings in the ensuing year it had worked out a system for the registration of Party membership, mapped out the new Districts, establishing District Party Committees (D.P.C.s), established a whole network of Departments and Committees (as laid down by the Commission) at National, District and local level.

The Sixth Congress of the Party, held on May 17-19, 1924, at the Caxton Hall, Salford, Manchester, eighteen months after Battersea, was not, in the main, concerned with questions of organisation. Its principal concern, as we have seen, was to make a political estimate of the role and position of the Labour Government, to outline a militant policy on home, foreign and colonial affairs around which the Labour Movement could be united and pressure developed on the reformist

¹ *Workers' Weekly* editorial, October 10, 1924, "The Labour Party Decision".

² "Report of C.E.C. on Party Organisation since the Battersea Congress", in *Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*

leaders of the Labour Party, and to expose the theories of reformism.

But, in the course of the Congress nearly all aspects of organisational work came under review. The Battersea line was endorsed, and the general approach adopted of continuing to apply the lines of the Commission's Report, whilst trying to correct some of the growing pains and extravagances that had developed in the course of putting into practice a Report which the Manchester Congress considered to be thoroughly correct and beneficial. In the words of the Executive Committee's "Statement on Party Organisation" which was submitted to the Sixth Congress:¹

"More than eighteen months' experience has fully justified the transformation of the Party."

There was, as we have seen, within the Commission's Report, the essential content of which was correct, salutary and, indeed, decisive for Party development, an element of complexity of organisation, of over-organisation, that might become an obstacle. Moreover, despite the warnings issued by the Commission that this was a general model, that it could not be put into practice overnight, there was inevitably the danger that either excess enthusiasm or mechanical procedure might lead to efforts of over-rapid, "instant" reorganisation, without stages or due attention to existing strength.

These dangers were reflected in the pre-Congress discussion that preceded the Sixth (Manchester) Congress of the Party of May 1924, and which was published in the *Workers' Weekly* and the *Communist Review*. There were complaints of crushing quantities of inner-Party meetings, of multitudes of tasks that got in the way of political work, of over-development of organisational machinery.²

It would seem that within these criticisms there were two different elements involved. On the one hand there was the continued resistance by some comrades to the general transformation initiated at Battersea, a looking back to old methods and forms of activity that had been current, for instance, in the old socialist groupings before the formation of the Communist Party. This was a resistance that still had to be overcome. On the other hand, there is no doubt that there *was* a danger of over-organisation, and that there was a genuine correct content within

¹ E.C. "Statement on Party Organisation" in *Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 45.

² See for instance A. Hawkins in pre-Congress discussion in *Workers' Weekly*, January 11, 1924, or E. W. Cant writing on "The Party Conference" in *Communist Review*, March 1924, Vol. IV, pp. 502-503.

the criticisms made by a number of members of the Party at that time.

Whatever the extent of the danger, it is, however important in estimating the fruits of the Commission and of the Battersea Congress to preserve a balance of judgement. The problems of over-organisation and *over-concentration* on inner-Party affairs were only one side and by far the least essential of the matter.

The Party had made, since Battersea an important step forward in its methods of work. It was again winning members (whatever dangers there might be of concentration on inner-Party activity), it was *in fact* turning outwards, correcting habits of generalisation and phrasemongering inherited from the older socialist groups, finding a more direct approach to the mass of the workers. And this was the *essence* of the Commission's Report and of the Battersea decisions.

As Harry Pollitt put it in the same pre-Congress discussion, polemising against an over-critical approach:

"For two years prior to Battersea Conference, we had lived in times of revolutionary happenings, the Party had a full feast of the 'high politics' school, revolutionary phrasemongering was the order of the day . . . the policy they [the active Party members] were working had no relation to the needs of the workers. . . ."¹

The big things, he added, for which the Commission stood *were* correct, and had been *proved* correct:

"These were the principles of a working Party carrying out the daily work of agitation in an organised manner under the central direction. . . ."

That the active membership of the Party was satisfied with the Battersea line and with the new leadership elected at Battersea was shown in the figures of the voting of the new Executive of the Sixth (Manchester) Congress (May 1924), when R. P. Dutt and Harry Pollitt headed the poll with William Gallacher (who had fought for the reorganisation) third and R. Page Arnot (who had also fought for it) fifth.²

¹ Harry Pollitt, "Looking Backwards not Forwards", in *Communist Review*, February 1924, Vol. IV, pp. 447-452.

² The voting was R. Palme Dutt 71, Harry Pollitt 71, William Gallacher 65, Thomas Bell 61, R. Page Arnot 58, J. R. Wilson 57, J. T. Murphy 54, E. Brown 52, Arthur Horner 52, T. A. Jackson 52, Wal Hannington 51, Arthur MacManus 51, C. Roebuck (Andrew Rothstein) 50, J. R. Campbell 47, G. Deacon 47, A. Ferguson 47, Helen Crawford 46, W. Brain 45, Bob Stewart 43. The following were elected as substitutes: A. Hawkins 43, E. Lansbury 39, E. Douglas 37 and Harry Webb 36 (*Workers' Weekly*, May 23, 1924).

It was in 1924 that the conception of the Political Bureau had developed into that of a continuous daily leadership of the Party, another rather fundamental change in conceptions of organisation, and it is again a reflection of the feeling of support for those who were seen as the leading force in the transformation of the Party that, at the first meeting of the Executive after the Sixth Congress, both Gallacher and Pollitt were appointed members of the Political Bureau, with Dutt as a substitute member.¹

Albert Inkpin was elected by Congress General Secretary by 42 votes against 37 for J. R. Wilson,² and as such attended both the Political and Organising Bureaux.

The Leading Committees of the Party

One of the problems that faced the Party in those early years of its existence was to find the most effective form of central leadership. The Battersea Congress took the first steps by ending the earlier federal form of organisation and replacing it by the Party units. But Battersea had decided on a small Executive Committee of nine members and this, though necessary at the time due to organisational and financial problems, did not prove satisfactory.³ In the months that followed Battersea a number of changes and co-options were made in the leadership, partly owing to the movements of various comrades, but partly because it was found necessary that there should be comrades on the central leadership who had practical experience of, and remained, as far as possible, practically engaged in the main forms of activities undertaken by the Party, including its activity in the mass movement. In particular, as we have seen, after a discussion between members of the Executive Committee of the C.P.G.B. with members of the Presidium of the Communist International, held in Moscow in the

¹ See the "Organising Report of the C.E.C.", in *Report of Seventh Congress of the C.P.G.B.* (May 30-June 1, 1925), pp. 141-142. Those appointed at the first meeting of the Executive were:

Political Bureau: T. Bell, W. Gallacher, A. MacManus, J. T. Murphy, H. Pollitt and C. Roebuck. *Substitutes:* J. R. Campbell and R. Palme Dutt.

Organising Bureau: R. Page Arnot, W. Brain, George Deacon, W. Hannington, T. Quelch, and R. Stewart. *Substitutes:* E. H. Brown and R. Palme Dutt.

² Verbatim Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B. and *Workers' Weekly*, May 23, 1924. See also Appendix in Vol. II to chapter VIII for details of Party leadership during this period.

³ In the early days of the Communist Party, the leading Committee was sometimes referred to as the Executive Committee (E.C.), sometimes as the Central Executive Committee (C.E.C.) and sometimes as the Central Committee (C.C.). I propose henceforth to refer to it as the Executive Committee (E.C.).

summer of 1923, and in which various international experiences had been reviewed, Horner and Hannington had been co-opted to the Central Committee, and the Political Bureau was reorganised to consist of five full-time Party workers, who could meet frequently and each of whom was put in charge of a specific sphere of Party activity.¹

One of the most important problems that came up for review during this period was the exact status, authority and role of the Political Bureau. This was discussed, for instance, at the January Executive of 1924² and it was agreed that the P.B. should be seen as the "custodian of Party policy between meetings of the Executive Committee". This conception was confirmed in the Executive's statement on Party organisation published in preparation for the Sixth (May 1924) Congress, and accepted by Congress.³ It was agreed that "between E.C. meetings the P.B. is vested with full executive authority of the Party". It was also agreed that a single General Secretary, elected by Congress, should replace the former Organisation and Political Secretaries.

When the size of the Executive was discussed at the Sixth Congress an Executive of nineteen plus the General Secretary was agreed upon. The nineteen were therefore elected by Congress on a general vote of delegates.

Another problem of national leadership was the search to find some form of broad national committee by which a wider section of members leading in various geographical areas and different fields of Party work should be associated with and meet regularly with the Executive Committee. For the purpose, on the proposal of the Commission, a Party Council had been elected at the Battersea Party Congress. In fact it did not prove to be very successful, meeting only twice (February and August) in the course of 1923. In particular its form of election came under criticism.⁴ Looking for an alternative method of living contact between the Executive Committee and the most active Party members in the Districts, the Executive called a consultative meeting of D.P.C. representatives at London on March 16, 1924,⁵ which dis-

¹ Report of E.C. on "Party Organisation Since Battersea" in *Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 50. The five members of the reorganised P.B. were Bell, Dutt, Gallacher, MacManus and Pollitt.

² Executive Minutes 1924.

³ E.C. Statement on Party Organisation prepared for Sixth Congress in *Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 45.

⁴ Report of E.C. on "Party Organisation Since Battersea" prepared for the Sixth Congress, in *Report of Sixth Congress*, p. 58.

⁵ *Workers' Weekly*, March 14, 1924.

cussed problems of recruitment and briefed the British delegation about to depart to an extended session of the E.C.C.I. Before the Sixth Congress the Executive proposed, and the Congress subsequently accepted, that the Party Council should henceforth be appointed by the D.P.C.s on the basis of one representative each, with one from large, as yet unattached, Locals.¹

In fact, even on this new basis, the Party Council did not seem to prove an effective form of organisation and only one meeting was held between the Sixth and Seventh Congresses of the Party² (May 1924 and May 1925).

The Executive continued to explore other forms of closer organised relationship between itself and the activities of the Districts, and following the Sixth Congress it organised a series of Open Sessions, held in different parts of the country, to which the local leading comrades were invited. Two of such meetings were held in 1924 (September and October), and a third in January 1925.³

The Party Congress in this period was reaffirmed as the supreme political organ of the Party. For the first time, at the Sixth Congress, two Commissions—one Political and one on Organisation—were organised to examine proposals during the Congress and make their reports to the plenary session. It was agreed that there should be no mandating of delegates, and also, in the interests of a full and democratic pre-Congress discussion, that all Congress materials should be made available at least three months before the sessions opened.⁴

It was during 1923–1924 that the various Departments of Party work, first proposed in the Commission's Report to the Battersea Congress, began to be organised. At the time of the Sixth Congress (May 1924), for instance, these Departments included—Industrial, Agitation and Propaganda, Parliamentary and Municipal, Colonial, Co-operative, Unemployed, Youth, Publications (technical) and Distribution, together with a Women's Section.

¹ E.C. Statement on Party Organisation prepared for Sixth Congress, in *Report of Sixth Congress*, p. 46, and "Report of E.C. on Party Organisation Since Battersea", *ibid.*, p. 58.

² Organisation Report of E.C. prepared for Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B. (Glasgow, May 30–June 1, 1925) in *Report of Seventh Congress*, p. 143.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143, also C.P.G.B. pamphlet *Is it a Labour Government?* and *Workers' Weekly*, October 17, 1924, p. 4. The three meetings were: *Manchester*, September 28, 1924: Discussion of Anniversary of First International; Dawes Plan Report; Anti-Labour Legislation. *London*, October 11, 1924: Discussion of General Election Preparations; L.P. Conference decisions; Recruiting. *Birmingham*, January 9, 1925.

⁴ Verbatim Report of Sixth Congress (A2/153), p. 1, and *Workers' Weekly*, May 23, 1924.

District Organisation

Following the Battersea Congress, the new Districts of the Party with their leading organs, the District Party Committees (D.P.C.s), were fairly rapidly established and the main job had been completed by the beginning of 1923. Ten D.P.C.s, as we have seen, were set up: London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Bradford, Tyneside, South Wales, Glasgow and Edinburgh, though the latter was dissolved early in 1924. The Districts established did not yet cover the whole country, and so a number of unattached local organisations were linked directly to the Party Headquarters through the Central Organisation Bureau. By mid-1924 there were nine Districts with a total of 51 local Party Committees and 135 local organisations, increasing by mid-1925 to 10 Districts with 59 L.P.C.s and 162 local organisations.¹ There was a net rise in members of around 1,100 in the course of the year between the Sixth and Seventh Party Congresses.²

In this period the London District was the strongest and best organised, with its members exerting considerable influence in the labour movement (including members in the London Trades Council and some fifty local Labour Parties and Trades Councils), but weak in the factories. Next was the Glasgow District with a good basis in heavy industry. The Manchester District had a fair influence, but its organisation had been bedevilled in the earlier part of 1924 by personal problems and dissensions, though it revived towards the end of the year, publishing the local paper, *The Spark*. The problem that dogged the South Wales District was the contrast between the relatively strong influence of revolutionary ideas in the mining valleys in and around the Rhondda, and the weakness of organisation of the Party itself. This was in part a survival of syndicalism, strong in the miners' reform movement. Revolutionary ideas were to be brought to the miners' Lodges and the specific role of the Communist *Party*, as distinct from Communist ideas, was not understood. A rather similar position pertained in Fife, where again the influence of Communism was strong, but the Communist Party organisations remained weak, and were weakened still further at this period by the divisions within the Miners' Union. In the Tyneside, too, there was a growing support for the Communist Party, particularly in the Durham coalfield, but not yet translated into organisational terms. Amongst the unattached Party Locals,

¹ See Appendix V to this chapter.

² Organisation Report of E.C. prepared for Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B. in *Report of Seventh Congress*, pp. 143-147.

those at Barrow, Brighton and Plymouth were amongst the most promising.

Problems of Membership

The early Marxist organisations were much more of the nature of propagandist clubs than organised political parties. This meant, not only a marked absence of centralisation and co-ordinated campaigning, but also that membership tended to be loose, unregistered, unstable, with a marked divergence between nominal supporters and controlled dues-paying members.¹ Whilst the B.S.P. claimed some 10,000 members at the moment of the formation of the Communist Party, this was an optimistic estimation of club and branch supporters rather than a serious calculation of membership. In fact, so far as members were concerned in the strict sense, by 1920 the B.S.P. numbered a few thousand, the S.L.P. a few hundreds, and the W.S.F. a few "tens". There was traditionally a great gulf between dues-paying regular membership and the influence exerted by the organisations and their press.

This was one of the profoundest problems inherited by the British Communist Party from the organisations out of which it was formed. When the Party absorbed its founder-bodies and began to reorganise its ranks into some order, its members, though never accurately registered at that time, were around 3,000, dropping to nearer 2,000 in mid 1922.² After Battersea, the necessity was recognised to adopt a proper system of membership registration, and this was roughly completed by the end of 1923,³ by which time Party membership was around 3,000.⁴ Early in 1924 a special Recruiting Department was established at the Party Centre under George Deacon.⁵

There was a recruiting drive at the end of 1923 and first months of 1924,⁶ and by the time of the Manchester (Sixth) Congress of the Party, in May 1924, membership stood at around 3,900.⁷

¹ See Chushichi Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman and British Socialism* (Oxford University Press, 1961), especially Appendix B on "S.D.F. membership".

² See Tom Bell's estimation quoted in chapter II and my remarks on p. 197-8.

³ Report of E.C. on "Party Organisation Since Battersea", in the *Report of the Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 54.

⁴ The figure of 3,000 was given by Arthur MacManus at the Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B. (verbatim report, p. 43).

⁵ *Workers' Weekly*, February 8, 1924.

⁶ Some 400 recruits were made between September 1923 and February 1924, mainly in the London and Glasgow Districts. See E.C. Report on "Party Organisation Since Battersea", in *Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B.*, pp. 55-56.

⁷ Organisation Report of E.C. prepared for Seventh Congress in *Report of 7th Congress of C.P.G.B.*, pp. 143-144.

The Sixth Congress recognised the urgent problems of building the Party, and in August 1924, the Executive Committee launched a planned and serious recruiting campaign.¹ An Open Letter to the membership from the E.C. attacked the older, narrow and "pedantic" attitude to recruiting. The aim should be, it said, to draw all good, honest fighters against capitalism into the Party; theoretical training should come, for the most part, *after* admission to the Party. A special Recruiting Week was held in September, widely popularised in the Party press.² Around 1,000 recruits were made between August and November 1924, the most considerable recruiting effort thus far in the history of the Party³ and by March 1925, before the Seventh Congress of the Party, allowing for the still considerable fluctuations, the Party had reached a membership of around 5,000, with the greatest progress made in the London, Glasgow and South Wales Districts.⁴

A number of latent problems connected with the composition of the Party began, in the course of 1924, to come to the surface. There was very considerable flux in membership. Bill Joss, an outstanding Scottish propagandist, for instance, summing up the lessons of a three months' tour of the Districts,⁵ remarked the fall-away from the Party of a number of "old timers" who could not adapt themselves to the new methods of Party work, particularly the turn to mass work on immediate issues. To some of them, schooled as they were in the older Marxist groupings, this concern with day-to-day issues seemed a sort of heresy. "They seem to miss," he wrote, "the resounding revolutionary speeches of the earlier movements." In their place came new younger recruits, often less well-read in political literature, but militant, active and with real links with the labour movement. "Their contempt for the phrasemongers," wrote Joss, "is like a breath of fresh air."

The period of the first Labour Government, the need to challenge the policy of the right-wing leaders, the decisions of the Labour Party Conference prohibiting Communists to stand as Labour Party candidates or even to take up individual membership of the Labour Party,

¹ A special letter signed by the whole E.C., "Intensify The Struggle", was sent to all members of the Party. See *Workers' Weekly*, August 15, 1924.

² *Workers' Weekly*, August 22, October 3, October 10, 1924.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Report of 7th Congress of C.P.G.B.* Report of A. Inkpin (p. 35) and Organisation Report of E.C. (pp. 143-144). By this time 65 per cent of the members were full and 35 per cent probationary members, compared with 86 per cent and 14 per cent of the previous year.

⁵ W. Joss: "Three Months of C.P. Propaganda", *Communist Review*, November 1924, Vol. V, p. 326.

the problem of facing the indignation of many Labour Party members and trade unionists who felt that it was necessary to be "loyal" whatever the policy of the Government, was a test of real loyalty to principle and to the Party. It was not by accident, therefore, that a handful of Party members, mainly of middle-class origin, including some whose names were well-known in the movement, should lack the political strength that was needed and prefer their political careers to the Party. Most of these men and women had come towards the Party in the immediate post-war years when "revolution" was in the air, when it was almost fashionable to term oneself a "revolutionary", when ideas were abroad of quick revolutionary successes rather than a hard, continuous, patient struggle against the stream; when, moreover, there seemed to be no contradiction between Party membership and a political career in Parliament.

It was in this context that a number of men and women, including Newbold, W. Mellor, Ellen Wilkinson, and F. L. Kerran lapsed or resigned from the Party.

Newbold, having lost his parliamentary seat in the 1923 election, began to drift away from the Party early in 1924; in August he withdrew from his position as Party candidate for Motherwell. He turned down offers of discussion of his position with the Political Bureau and the Executive, and publicly resigned early in September,¹ ostensibly on differences on the role of the Labour Party and Labour Government. Philips Price fell away in the same period.² William Mellor, working on the *Daily Herald*, resigned in October.³ Ellen Wilkinson, who had been nominated for selection as Labour candidate for East Newcastle, lapsed early in the year.⁴ R. W. Postgate and F. L. Kerran also fell away from the Party in this period.⁵ E. P. Whitehead, in a different category from the above, originally a member of the Workers' Socialist Federation, accepted nomination as Labour candidate for Hendon, and left the Party in June 1924.⁶

Thus 1924, despite difficulties and individual losses of a handful of

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, September 12 and September 26, 1924; *Daily Herald*, September 6, 1924. See also Minutes of Political Bureau for September 1924 (159).

² Minutes of Political Bureau of March 7, 1924; Minutes of E.C. of May 24-25, 1924 (156).

³ Minutes of Political Bureau, October 3, 1924 (159).

⁴ Minutes of Political Bureau, February 20 and March 25, 1924 (159).

⁵ For Postgate see Minutes of Political Bureau of September 30, 1924. For Kerran see Minutes of Political Bureau of September 23, 1924.

⁶ Minutes of Political Bureau of June 27, 1924, and *Workers' Weekly*, July 4, 1924.

older members who could not break themselves of old sectarian habits, and a handful whose opportunism was laid bare by the need for grim adherence to principle and readiness to sacrifice career to the Party, was none the less marked by an important turn towards planned recruiting to the Party.

The Party remained small; its size continued to bear no relation to its influence, particularly in areas like Fife and the Rhondda. Indeed, one of the questions that came up for discussion at the Party Council in November 1924, was the possibility of organising the many *sympathisers* of the Party,¹ an idea that was rejected as it was felt that this could be seen as an alternative to the real task, which was that of building the Party itself.

Three positive advances should be noted in relation to the membership of the Party in this period of the first Labour Government. In the first place there was a definite appreciation of the urgent need to carry out systematic recruiting to the Party, and the first really consistent planned recruiting drive was carried through. In the second place, the drive for the organisation of factory groups, which had begun in the Organising Bureau in September 1923, and had been made known in a series of articles in the *Workers' Weekly*,² became more effective. The Executive Statement on Party Organisation to the Sixth Congress of the Party³ recognised the factory groups "as the most important units of the Party around which all other groups will subsequently gather . . .". But there was still resistance within the Party and much misunderstanding and confusion of factory groups with trade union groups. It was only towards the end of 1924 that the work seriously got going.⁴

Finally at the Sixth Congress, and thereafter, the narrow conception of the Party began to be combated and the idea launched of the need in Britain for a *mass* Communist Party.

Education and Campaigning

The period of Labour Government demanded a clear, principled position by the Party towards the right-wing leaders of the Labour Party

¹ Minutes of Party Council of November 30, 1924.

² *Workers' Weekly*, October 10, 1924 (p. 2).

³ E.C. Statement on Party Organisation: *Report of 6th Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 47.

⁴ See "Thesis on Bolshevisation" adopted at Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B., *Report of 7th Congress*, p. 201. Resistance to Factory Groups was particularly strong in the London District of the Party. It was forcibly expressed, for example, at an aggregate meeting of the whole London District in autumn 1924.

and Government. There could be no *ideological* compromise between Marxism and reformism, however much there could be united action between Communists and supporters of the Labour Party. The Party found it, therefore, necessary to take up a critical attitude towards much of the material issued by the Plebs League (later to become the National Council of Labour Colleges, or N.C.L.C.) in which a number of Party members were actively collaborating, including some, like R. W. Postgate, who were hesitating in their attitude to the Party. The *Plebs* was turning out, often in very abstract and dogmatic form, a sort of generalised non-combative "Marxism". The Party did not call for a break with the Plebs League, but criticised some of its trends.¹ There could be, it said, no such thing as a "non-Party Marxism". The treatment of economic and philosophical questions was often abstract and dogmatic. Contemporary political issues were being shirked. There was no treatment of the role of a Marxist Party. And therefore, under the cover of acceptance of Marxism, the revolutionary essence of Marxism was being rejected.

The degenerating role of the *Plebs* made all the more important the development of Marxist-Leninist education under the direct aegis of the Party. Systematic Party education had started already in 1922, and was already a big step forward on the generalised "Marxism" of the Plebs League. After the Sixth Congress of the Party (in May 1924), and especially in the following year,² there was considerable progress in this field.

One of the organisational problems that faced the Party was that of the organising of planned consistent campaigns. We have seen that a first beginning had been made in the 1920-1923 period. The year 1924 saw a certain progress, though the results were very uneven.³ There was a short but intense Week of Anti-War Campaigning between July 27—August 4, 1924, when some 215 meetings were reported from up and down the country. A campaign against the Dawes Plan was vigorously launched in March, but tended to peter out later in the year. There was a well-organised national campaign for the celebration of the Seventh Anniversary of the October Revolution. But certainly the most successful campaign was the recruiting drive launched in August, which continued over into the following year, and which was planned,

¹ C.P.G.B. circular, "On C.P. Policy Towards the Plebs League", 1924 (no month indicated) (179).

² Organisation Report of E.C. to Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B.: *7th Congress Report*, pp. 159-160.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-155.

controlled, checked on and reported. A Party Propaganda Committee was established in November but, of course, the main vehicle for the organisation of campaigns was the press and publications of the Party.

Party Press and Publications in 1924

At the time of the replacement of the *Communist* by the *Workers' Weekly*, at the beginning of 1923, circulation, officially around 19,000, was nearer, in terms of real sales, to 8,000-10,000. With the new journal it rose rapidly to around 50,000 by March 1923, falling to around 40,000 later in the year.¹ The background of the Labour Government and the increased political activity of the Party stimulated sales which moved up towards an average of 50,000 again by the end of 1924.² On one or two occasions a higher figure was reached. The May Day issue (May 2, 1924) reached 65,000.³ The issue of October 17 had to be reprinted, and for that one number the cherished target of 100,000 was actually attained.⁴ The circulation was itself a tribute to the strengthened Party organisation as well as to the voluntary sacrifice of the readers and supporters. More than nine-tenths of the total circulation was distributed, at this period of wholesalers' and distributors' boycott, through direct Party channels. Denied special facilities available to the capitalist press, trains had to be met as early as 2 a.m., copies were taken miles on foot or on cycle to outlying readers; advertisement and display were replaced by door to door canvassing.⁵

Production, too, as well as distribution was to a large extent on a voluntary basis. Around the Editor was a voluntary group working right through the night two nights a week.

Worker correspondents, sending in news from their factories or localities, were a marked feature of the *Workers' Weekly*.⁶ When the Editor, R. Palme Dutt, became ill in mid-1924, he was replaced by

¹ Average monthly sales in latter half of 1923: July 35,345; August 33,770; September 37,819; October 39,078; November 44,544; December 41,210. See *Workers' Weekly*, February 15, 1924, p. 1.

² Average weekly sales by quarters in 1924: 1st qtr. 41,757; 2nd qtr. 48,371; 3rd qtr. 45,781; 4th qtr. 51,551. See Organisation Report of E.C. prepared for Seventh Party Congress in *7th Congress Report*, pp. 149-150.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, May 16, 1924, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 24, 1924.

⁵ *Ibid.*, February 15, 1924, "A Year's Achievement", by A. H. Hawkins.

⁶ In the first year of its existence the *Workers' Weekly* received about 2,500 letters from such correspondents of which 394 were used in full and 1,149 in part. See "How Our Paper is Made" by T. H. Wintringham, Asst. Ed., in *Workers' Weekly*, February 15, 1924, p. 4.

J. R. Campbell, and T. H. Wintringham became his assistant.¹ The long-term aim of the Party, a *daily* political paper, came under review at the May 1924 meeting of the Executive Committee, but it was not felt that this aim was as yet practicable and the improvement of the circulation of the existing weekly was agreed upon as the immediate target.²

But the close links of the *Workers' Weekly* with the future *Daily Worker* should here be noted. On the title lead was printed "Forerunner of the Workers' Daily". There were several trial runs—twice (still in the days of the *Communist*) during the 1922 elections; once during the Dockers Strike of July 1923, and again during the 1923 elections. The move from weekly to daily was later to become a major issue within the Party.

With the theoretical and information journals of the Party and the English editions of international Communist journals, there was little progress in this period. The *Communist Review*, after the Manchester Congress, had a circulation around 3,000.³ The *Communist International* was around 200–700, and the English edition of *International Press Correspondence* (Inprecorr) around 200.⁴ The *Labour Monthly* was selling steadily, and gaining considerable support from the left in the Labour and trade union movement. The controversy in the Labour Movement, particularly around the policy of the Labour Government, strengthened interest amongst the workers for the various Party pamphlets. There was a steady sale of around 5,000 for pamphlets of a general political character like the *Record of the Labour Government*, *Is It a Labour Government?* or *Empire Socialism*.⁵ In the twelve months between the Sixth and Seventh Party Congresses, something like two million leaflets were distributed by the Party.⁶ Sales of literature from the Party bookshop at 16, King Street rose steadily in the course of 1924, reaching a turn-over of around £200 per week at the time of the Anti-War Week and General Election.⁷

¹ *Workers' Weekly*, July 4, 1924, and Organisation Report of E.C. to Seventh Party Congress in *Congress Report*, pp. 149–150.

² Minutes of Executive Committee, May 24–25, 1924 (156).

³ Organisation Report of E.C. to Seventh Congress, pp. 149–150.

⁴ E.C. Report on "Party Organisation Since Battersea", in *Report of 6th Congress of C.P.G.B.*, pp. 60–61.

⁵ Organisation Report of E.C. to Seventh Congress, pp. 150–151. For full list of publications see Appendix at end of Vol. II.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–164.

Work amongst Women and Youth

The first National Conference of Communist Women was held on May 18-19, 1924, at Manchester, in the course of the sessions of the Sixth Congress of the Party. This was a first attempt seriously to face up to an immense problem that concerned not only Communists but the whole British Labour Movement. The work and organisation of the labour movement amongst women was traditionally weak. Even with the Women's Co-operative Guilds and to a small extent the Labour Advisory Committees, the political organisations of the working class hardly touched the mass of working women, and the trade unions organised only around half a million, against roughly three million women working in industry.¹ There were about 80,000 members of the Women's Co-operative Guild early in 1924.² About 200,000 women were registered as unemployed, but many women had withdrawn from industry as a result of the mass unemployment, and women's trade union membership had fallen around 400,000 since 1921.

At that period about 14 per cent of the membership of the Communist Party were women, but organised Communist work amongst women was very weak indeed. There were but few Communist women in the factories (where the main sphere of women workers was in the textile and boot and shoe industries, in offices, in catering, etc.) and very few playing an active part in the Co-operative movement.³ The aim of the Conference, therefore, was to consider how to strengthen Labour organisations generally amongst the women, how to increase women's support directly for the Communist Party, and what type of special Communist organisation was necessary in this field. Some 27 women attended, mainly from areas where the Party was strongest.⁴ At the conclusion Mrs. Beth Turner was elected National Women's Organiser. A Central Women's Department was established at Party Centre.⁵

It was agreed that so far as possible Women's Propaganda Com-

¹ See Helen Crawford's speech at National Conference of Communist Women. Of these 80,000 around 51,000 were in England and Wales, and 28,000 in Scotland.

² *Ibid.*

³ Party Centre only had some 50 members, listed as members of the Women's Co-operative Guilds, early in 1924. See unpublished report by Harry Pollitt on "Situation of Women in Britain". Party Records.

⁴ London, Scotland, S. Wales, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Barrow, Newcastle.

⁵ With Harry Pollitt as one of its members.

mittees be set up at District and Local level.¹ It was also after the Sixth Party Congress that more steps were taken by the Party to study the problems of the Co-operative movement in general, and to call on all members of the Party to play their part in that section of the labour movement.²

If the British labour movement was, traditionally, weak amongst the working women, the position amongst the youth, as we saw in the last chapter, was still more serious, and small indeed as was the size of the Young Communist League at the outset of 1924, and restricted as was the scale of its activities, it represented none the less something of a pioneer force amongst the industrial youth of Great Britain.

The first National Conference of leaders of the Communist Children's Section was held on March 1-2, 1924, under the auspices of the Y.C.L.,³ with representatives from London, Scotland, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Barrow, the children holding their own session on the second day.

The League joined with the Party in its effort to press the Labour Government into some form of action in the interests of the working class, putting forward in May a five-point programme of measures to improve the lot of the youth—a minimum wage for all young workers; the raising of the school leaving age to sixteen; the elimination of night work for all youth under eighteen; the provision of free meals for school children; and the granting of full political rights to the youth in the armed forces including the right to refuse to blackleg.⁴ The campaign, however, around these points met only the deaf ears of the Labour Government. Meeting at the end of May, the Y.C.L. Executive and Council decided to improve their method of socialist education and, in particular to direct more attention to work in the pits and the factories.⁵ By the eve of the Sixth Congress of the C.P.G.B., the *Young Worker*, which had replaced the *Young Communist* as organ of the League, was selling around 6,500 copies, and Y.C.L. membership was about 500 in 31 Branches.⁶

¹ By the Seventh Congress, District Women's Committees were functioning at Glasgow, Manchester, Sheffield and Bradford, and 34 local Committees had been established. *Report of 7th Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 163.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Workers' Weekly*, February 29, March 7, 1924. It was opened by D. F. Springhall of the E.C. of the Y.C.L. and the report of the work of the Children's Sections was given by Doris Kerr, later Doris Allison.

⁴ "The Cry of the Young Workers", in *Workers' Weekly*, May 2, 1924, p. 7.

⁵ *Workers' Weekly*, June 20, 1924, p. 4.

⁶ Political Report of E.C., C.P.G.B. for Sixth Congress, *Report of 6th Congress*, pp.

The problem of the youth and of strengthening the Y.C.L. was one of the issues that came for discussion before the Sixth Congress of the Party (Manchester, May 17-19, 1924).¹ Noting that there had been a certain "consolidation and growth" in the League, the Congress criticised its neglect of anti-militarist activity. But the main theme of the resolution was the need for strengthening the work of the Party itself amongst the youth and in support of the Y.C.L. The importance of this work had not as yet been properly appreciated within the Party. Now the call was made from Congress for *direct organisational* assistance to the League. Younger members of the Party should be won to become active members of the League. It was agreed that all Party members under 21 should automatically become members, whilst those between 21 and 23 should be persuaded to do so, that (while organisationally the League should remain autonomous) there should continue to be mutual exchange of representatives on their respective Executives. There should be close co-operation in the field of anti-militarist activity and the Party should work with the League in building the Communist Children's Sections.

The Rally in Trafalgar Square on September 7 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of International Youth Day, with 5,000 in attendance, was one of the biggest rallies that the League had organised to date and the appearance of a representative of the German Y.C.L. was enthusiastically received.² In October, the Party again called on its members to build the Y.C.L.³ whilst, at the end of the year the League, in its turn, plunged valiantly into the General Election campaign in support of the Communists and Labour Party candidates,⁴ with special leaflets and special editions of the *Young Worker*, and of *Young Comrade*, the journal of the Children's Sections. By the end of the year, the League had made little progress in the factories, and, in general, in contrast to the Party, only a minority of its members were drawn from the working class.⁵

Viewed in retrospect, these early beginnings of the Y.C.L. in Britain seem so restricted as to be of little influence. In fact this was not so.

58-59. At this time the Y.C.L. Executive consisted of Minnie Birch, Doris Kerr, R. Palme Dutt (from C.P.), A. Pearce, W. Rust, E. Rothstein, Gildersleeve, D. F. Springhall, H. Young.

¹ See Resolution on the Y.C.L. in *Report of 6th Congress*, pp. 43-44.

² *Workers' Weekly*, September 12, 1924.

³ See special page on Y.C.L. in *Workers' Weekly*, October 3, 1924.

⁴ Organisation Report of E.C. prepared for Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B. *Report*, pp. 161-163.

⁵ Analysis of registration showed 40 per cent young workers, 60 per cent non-industrial.

There were indeed many weaknesses, of which sectarianism was by far the greatest. The League at this date tended to be a replica of the Party, making little appeal in its language, activities and methods of work and approach to young people; but it was working against the current and against the tradition. It is quite true that inside the Party there was a chronic underestimation of the problem of work amongst the youth, but this was a reflection of the general position inside the labour movement. Many of the future leaders of the Party, like, for instance, William Rust, received their first political training and experience inside the Y.C.L. Above all, the work of the League helped to promote a feeling amongst young people inside the Labour Party and inside the I.L.P. that they too should have the right to form their own autonomous youth organisations.

The previous year a special sub-committee of the Labour Party Executive had rejected the idea of the formation of a special Labour Youth organisation. The Labour Executive, in preparation for the 1924 London Conference of the Party, adopted their sub-committee's recommendation. They proposed that the Young People's Sections (composed of youth of 14-21 years) should be merely a part of the local adult organisations and that no autonomous youth organisation should be permitted.¹ They also suggested that the work of these youth sections should be "mainly recreational and educational and care should be taken not to over-emphasise their political side". Their main political activity should be to support the Labour Party in its electoral campaigns. The right-wing leaders of the Party feared the militancy and rebelliousness of the youth, and if they were to be permitted a political activity it was to be that of canvassing under suitable adult supervision.

These timid recommendations were sharply challenged in the course of the debates at the Twenty-fourth Conference.² One delegate³ demanded that the existing Young Labour League should be reconstituted as an autonomous national youth organisation of the Labour Party with age limit of 25 and with emphasis on political training. Another⁴ moved a resolution that Young People's Sections should be established *on the same basis* as the men's and women's sections, with full

¹ Report of Labour Party E.C. to Twenty-fourth Conference. In verbatim Report, pp. 23-25.

² Verbatim Report of Twenty-fourth Conference of the L.P., pp. 117-119.

³ Dr. W. McGregor Reid of Clapham Labour Party, also representative of the Young Labour League.

⁴ Mark Starr, Wimbledon, Merton and Morden Labour Party.

electoral rights and representation, and with a view of founding a national youth organisation. Another demanded that, as "the oldest youth organisation in the country", the affiliation of the Young Communist League to the Labour Party should be accepted. But all these proposals were rejected by the Executive representative's reply to the discussion.¹ The Young People's Sections, he insisted, not only must be integral parts of the *local* parties, but the Party "did not see its way to concede to those Youth Sections . . . the same powers with regard to policy, voting and selection of candidates as they would give to adult sections." The resolution was defeated. The Labour Youth were neither to be permitted to form their own organisation, nor to enjoy equality with the adults within the Party.

The same pressure for the formation of a National Youth Organisation was operating within the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.). By 1924 local youth organisations were functioning at Glasgow, Ipswich, and a number of other areas. The National Administrative Council (N.A.C.) in its Report for the York Conference of the I.L.P. (April 20-22, 1924) recommended the formation of an I.L.P. Guild of Youth,² "with the object of meeting the athletic and cultural needs of young socialists and preparing them for participation in the work of the Party". It was proposed that the age-limit for membership should be 14-21 years, and that "the Guild should have complete autonomy commensurate with the principles and objects of the I.L.P."³ It was agreed, moreover, that a Conference should be held at York to launch the Guild on a national basis.

THE FALL OF THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT

The Campbell Case

On July 25, 1924, in preparation for the Party's Anti-War Week campaign, the *Workers' Weekly* published an "Open Letter to the Fighting Forces", written in fact by Harry Pollitt.⁴ The letter showed how successive capitalist governments in Britain had used the armed forces to threaten and intimidate militant workers and to break strikes. It appealed to the men in the forces:

¹ Egerton Wake.

² Report of the N.A.C. of I.L.P. for presentation at York Conference, April 20-22, 1924, p. 32.

³ Frank Rouse of the St. Pancras Branch of the I.L.P. was appointed hon. provisional secretary.

⁴ For full text see Appendix VI to this chapter.

“Definitely and categorically let it be known that, neither in the class war nor a military war, will you turn your guns on your fellow workers, but instead will line up with your fellow workers in an attack upon the exploiters and capitalists, and will use your arms on the side of your own class.”

It called on them to organise Committees in barracks, aerodromes and ships.

Though such an appeal corresponded to the best militant traditions of the British radical and labour movement, it was not such as to smooth the feelings of the British ruling class. Already a few days later Tory M.P.s were asking angry questions in the House of Commons,¹ to be informed by defensive Labour spokesmen that the Home Secretary had the matter under consideration.

On August 5, J. R. Campbell, who was the Acting-Editor of the *Workers' Weekly* in the absence of R. Palme Dutt, was taken into custody, whilst eight plain-clothes policemen raided and ransacked the offices of the paper and of the Party at 16, King Street.² Challenged with the fact that they had no search warrant, they replied that they had merely arrested a “suspect”, that they were “looking for evidence”, and removed in a lorry a couple of thousand copies of the *Workers' Weekly*, along with a large quantity of documents and papers from the Party offices, totally unconnected with the “Campbell Case”.

Campbell himself was charged at Bow Street under the Incitement to Mutiny Act of 1797,³ the Act under which Tom Mann, in 1912, had suffered six months' imprisonment. He was accused of having

“feloniously, maliciously and advisedly endeavoured to seduce divers persons unknown, then serving in His Majesty's Navy, Army and Airforce, from their allegiance to His Majesty—to wit such persons as should thereafter receive and read a certain printed publication, called the *Workers' Weekly* of July 25.”

The Court refused to return the documents, however irrelevant to the charge, whilst Campbell was released on bail of £200 and remanded for a week.

A statement of the Party's Executive Committee⁴ strongly defended

¹ See J. R. Campbell, *My Case*, C.P.G.B. pamphlet, 16pp., 1924.

² *Workers' Weekly*, August 8, 1924, p. 1, also Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*

³ Enacted at the time of the naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore.

⁴ *Workers' Weekly*, August 8, 1924, p. 1.

the Open Letter. It called for solidarity action from all sections of the Labour Movement and for popular pressure of every kind to secure the withdrawal of the charges against Campbell. Nor was such solidarity slow in coming. Already in the House of Commons on August 6, when the Attorney-General, Sir Patrick Hastings, announced the prosecution, a storm of protest arose from the Labour benches.¹ Maxton, of the I.L.P., declared that the article contained "mainly a call to the troops not to allow themselves to be used in industrial disputes".² Dickson, Labour M.P. for Lanark, warned that if sentiments such as these were to become the cause of prosecution, the Government would find half its own Party in the dock.³ Within a few days *Forward* had condemned the "stupid prosecution which should never have begun"⁴ and the *New Leader* had denounced what it termed "a shocking error of judgement".⁵ The *Daily Herald* was critical of the Government. It was on this issue along with industrial aims and relations with the U.S.S.R. that working-class opinion was to come out most clearly in condemnation of the policy of Ramsay MacDonald and his Cabinet.

In the week between Campbell's first appearance at Bow Street and his trial, resolutions of protest had poured out from Labour Parties, trade union branches and Trades Councils all over the country.⁶

Faced with this strong and growing pressure, the Government retreated, but in its own typically reformist way. When Campbell appeared again in court after his week's remand, the prosecution counsel declared:

"It has been represented that the object and intention of the article in question was not an endeavour to seduce men in the fighting forces from their duty . . . but it was a comment upon armed military force being used by the State to repress industrial disputes. . . .

" . . . It has been possible for the Director of Public Prosecution to accept that alleged intention of this article more easily because the defendant is a man of excellent character with an admirable military record."⁷

¹ Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

² 176, *H.C. Deb.*, S.S., 2928-30.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, August 8, 1924, p. 1.

⁴ 176, *H. C. Deb.*, S.S., 2928-30.

⁵ Quoted by R. Palme Dutt in "Notes of the Month", *Labour Monthly*, November 1924, p. 649.

⁶ See J. R. Campbell, *My Case*, Communist Party pamphlet, 1924 (16 pp.).

⁷ Quoted in Snowden's *Autobiography*, Vol. II, p.692 (see also *Workers' Weekly*, August 15, 1924).

The Director of Public Prosecutions had been instructed, therefore, to offer no evidence against Campbell, to drop the case.

This was a retreat, but a manoeuvre. The Government declared that it feared the prosecution would prove unsuccessful; in fact, it had been obliged to withdraw by the labour movement, who, knowing capitalist processes of law, feared it *would* be successful. The Government (for once—and this was not a precedent) bent over backwards to give a respectable, apologetic interpretation of the Open Letter. In fact, nothing was less apologetic than the letter itself or the subsequent Communist support of it. Campbell himself was the least apologetic:

“Many Labour people are defending the Government’s action in the Campbell case on the grounds that I am a *poor innocent wounded soldier*, who has fallen among [the] wicked. . . . The real vital issue of the case is that there are on the Statute Book numerous Sedition Laws, Mutiny Acts, and other forms of anti-labour legislation which, while they are allowed to be dormant in periods of social calm, can always be revived and used against the Labour Movement in a period of crisis.”¹

The pusillanimous position of MacDonald and his Government assured them the worst of all worlds. By allowing, in the first place, the charges to be brought, and then, in the second place, withdrawing them on a feeble pretext, they separated themselves from the militant working-class movement. Their withdrawal of the charges under mass Labour pressure caused British reaction and all the solid “defenders of law and order” to fulminate with wrath. The capitalist press burst into bombastic banner headlines:² “A licence for sedition”, screamed the *Morning Post*, “Truckling to Communism”, cried the *Westminster Gazette*. “It undermines”, mournfully pontificated *The Times*, “the confidence of the public in the procedure of our Courts of Law.”

In their attacks on the Government the capitalist spokesmen and press never stayed for a moment until its final fall on October 8. In one sense this could well be understood, because nothing was more sacred to the ruling class than its capitalist state, along with its whole network of capitalist law and capitalist justice. How could a Government be trusted that, however, unwillingly, weakened or tampered with the holy of holies? But more than this, the great crime of the Labour Government, that made it essential for it to be removed, was the

¹ J. R. Campbell, *My Case*, p. 4.

² See *Workers' Weekly*, August 22, 1924, p. 1.

evidence that on this issue, as on the issue of the Treaty with the U.S.S.R., the Government could be forced to retreat *under the mass pressure of the labour movement*. That a Labour Government should yield, however grudgingly and half-heartedly, to the pressure of labour—this could not be tolerated.

The Campbell case, therefore, became a critical stage in the downfall of the Labour Government. Whilst angry workers were shouting "Biscuits!" at MacDonald's meetings,¹ the angry press continued to fulminate at his betrayal. On October 8, Sir Robert Horne moved a vote of censure in the House of Commons. A Liberal amendment called for the appointment of a Select Committee to investigate and report on the circumstances leading up to the withdrawal of proceedings against J. R. Campbell.² MacDonald made it a question of confidence, and with 198 votes for the Tory censure and 364 for the Liberal amendment, the Government fell.³

The Zinoviev Letter

With the capitalist press breathing fire the General Election approached. They were seeing "Reds" everywhere, including in the Labour Cabinet that had so reliably carried out their policy. But one final scoop was needed to stampede the electors.

It came, tactically timed, on the last Friday before the Wednesday's (October 29) poll. *The Times* announced "Soviet Plot—Red Propaganda in Great Britain—Revolution Urged by Zinoviev—Foreign Office Bombshell"!⁴ Compared to its colleagues *The Times* headlines were modest. It appeared that the Foreign Office had received the

¹ J. R. MacDonald accepted from Sir Alexander Grant, a wealthy biscuit manufacturer, the gift of a magnificent Daimler car along with 30,000 shares in McVitie & Price to cover its operating expenses. Grant had just received a baronetcy for his philanthropic activities. See Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 240, and L. McNeil Weir's *The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald—a Political Biography*, p. 159. "Biscuits" became the hecklers' war-cry.

² L. McNeil Weir, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

³ In a note to the author (1965) J. R. Campbell comments: "I fully believe now that there never would have been a 'Campbell case' had we let the statement in court in which the charge was withdrawn go without comment. We were so intent on maintaining a revolutionary purity that we felt we had to make a statement underlining the fact:

(1) that we had made no representations regarding the meaning of the article,

(2) that we stood by the article, and

(3) that the prosecution had been withdrawn because of the pressure of the movement

This gave the press, headed by the *Morning Post*, an opportunity to enquire:

(1) who *had* made the representations, and

(2) who had, in fact, exerted the pressure."

⁴ *The Times*, October 25, 1924.

copy of a letter (no "original" was ever to be forthcoming) supposedly signed by Zinoviev and Arthur MacManus, and purporting to be addressed from the headquarters of the Third International to the British Communist Party. Somehow, it was claimed, this "Zinoviev Letter" had found its way into the possession of the *Daily Mail* and thence into the faithful hands of the Foreign Office.

At the psychological moment, the Foreign Office now published a strong Note of Protest to the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires, Rakovsky, signed not by the Foreign Minister Ramsay MacDonald, not Lord Ponsonby, not even by the Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir Eyre Crow, but by J. D. Gregory, a permanent civil servant in charge of the so-called Northern Department of the F.O.¹

A reply was immediately despatched by Rakovsky, categorically denying the authenticity of the letter, pointing out internal evidence from the text that it was nothing but a forgery, and protesting that the Foreign Office Note was, itself, a violation of the May settlement of the previous year, which laid it down that all difficulties between the two countries should be tackled, in the first place, by mutual discussion. The "letter", wrote Rakovsky, was:

"a gross forgery, and an audacious attempt to prevent the development of friendly relations between the two countries."²

Zinoviev, too, immediately denied the despatch of the "letter" and offered to accept whatever decision emerged from an investigation to be carried out by the T.U.C. official delegation then touring the Soviet Union.³

But what were denials or calls for investigation to the rampaging Tories on the eve of the poll?

"The story of Kerensky, how he stood there, like Mr. MacDonald, pretending that he meant to do the best he could for his country, and all the time apologising behind the scenes to the wild, dark, deadly forces which had him in their grip."⁴

In a blood-curdling eve of the poll oration the Marquess of Curzon threatened that:

¹ See Richard W. Lyman, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

² See *History of the Zinoviev Letter*, with a Commentary by A. MacManus, C.P.G.B., September 1925 (48 pp.), pp. 12-13.

³ *The Times*, October 27, 1924.

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 27, 1924.

"anyone who voted for Labour tomorrow was voting for handing this country over to the Communists and to Moscow."¹

The position in the Labour camp was almost impossible. The normal militant understood instinctively that this was a typical forgery carefully timed to synchronise with the election. Some leading members of the Labour Party and even of the Labour Government recognised it for what it was. Sidney Webb, for instance, then President of the Board of Trade, and engaged in an electoral contest, denounced it at once as a forgery. But where was the Government's answer? Why was MacDonald silent?²

For two days MacDonald kept the electorate waiting, and then produced, not a categorical denial, not a class explanation, but a lame and unconvincing apology. He broke his silence on October 27. The "letter", he explained, had just reached the Foreign Office on October 10; it reached him whilst on his campaign tour on October 16. He had asked for its authenticity to be checked. Meanwhile a draft Foreign Office protest was despatched to him which he received on October 23.

"On the morning of the 24th I looked at the draft, I altered it and sent it back, expecting it to come back with the proofs of its authenticity. But that night it was published."³

The Communist Party had always claimed that the existing state in Britain was an organ of capitalist power, that unless the state was radically transformed Labour Ministers would be its prisoners, that it was the permanent officials of the Foreign Office and not the Minister of Foreign Affairs that, in the interests of capitalism, decided foreign policy. The Labour leaders angrily rejected this analysis. Here was a classic example of the correctness of the Communist view. And what was MacDonald's reaction—to punish the offenders or at least to repudiate their action? On the contrary:

"I make no complaints. . . . They assured me they were carrying out my wishes in taking immediate steps to publish the whole affair. They honestly believed the document authentic, and upon that belief they acted."⁴

¹ Ibid., October 29, 1924.

² See Richard W. Lyman, op. cit., p. 259, and G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948, p. 167.

³ MacDonald's Cardiff speech, quoted in *Workers' Weekly*, October 31, 1924. See also Richard W. Lyman, op. cit., p. 260.

⁴ Ibid.

The text of the famous "letter" was a fairly crude fabrication, and it is of some importance to note its details, including wording and spelling.¹ Headed "very secret" it was addressed to the Central Committee, British Communist Party from the "Third, Communist International, Moscow", dated September 15, 1924, and signed Zinovieff, President of the Presidium, MacManus, Member of the Presidium, and Kuusinen, Secretary.

The British proletariat, the "letter" declared, must fight for the ratification of the Anglo-Soviet Treaty, must "keep close observation over the leaders of the Labour Party", must organise a "campaign of disclosure" of the foreign policy of MacDonald. Then it proceeded to the more hair-raising sections. The last report, it says, shows "agitation and propaganda work in the Army is weak, in the Navy a very little better". It is desirable, it continued, to have cells in all units of the Army and also in factories working on munitions and in military store depots. In the event of war, these cells, in contact with the transport workers, could paralyse all the military preparations of the bourgeoisie, and make a start in turning an imperialist war into a civil war.

The "military section of the Communist Party", the "letter" continued, "suffers from a lack of specialists, the future directors of the British Red Army". It is necessary to form "a directing operative lead (head?) of the military section. . . ."

The British Communist Party, the Communist International, MacManus and Zinoviev personally, all who had real knowledge of the character of correspondence between the C.I. and the C.P.G.B., hastened to produce the internal evidence of the obvious falsity of the "Zinoviev Letter".²

The document, for instance, was headed "Third International", a title which had been dropped and replaced by "Communist International" after the Second Congress of the C.I. of 1920. The journal *Communist* had been published at first as "organ of the Third (Communist) International", but this had been dropped after 1921 at request of the C.I. The document purported to come from the "Presidium" of the E.C.C.I. (Executive Committee of the Communist International), whereas, in fact, no such "Presidium" existed, and all C.I. correspondence was sent out in the name of the E.C.C.I. itself. The E.C.C.I.,

¹ See *Workers' Weekly*, October 31, 1924, p. 3, and *History of the Zinoviev Letter*, C.P.G.B., pp. 5-9.

² See *ibid.*, pp. 3-4; *The History of the Zinoviev Letter*, C.P.G.B.; E.C. of C.P.G.B. Statement of October 25, 1924 in *History of Zinoviev Letter*, p. 40; W. P. and Z. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, chapter VII.

in the document, became "I.K.K.I.", the U.S.S.R. the "S.S.S.R.", the "nuclei" of the Party which, at that period was the official name of organisations in particular fields, became "cells". The signatures were incorrect. Zinoviev never signed as "President of the Presidium" nor MacManus as "Member of the Presidium".

All this was verbal evidence that the "Zinoviev Letter" was a forgery. But even more convincing was the political content of the document. The line of the Party on military affairs had been put quite openly in the famous *Workers' Weekly* letter that became the basis of the Campbell case. But the most blood-curdling section of this document, the part that was to lay the basis for the Red-plot headlines, was the description of the work of the so-called "military section" of the Party, an organisation which, quite simply, did not exist and never had existed. Moreover this was linked with a whole conception of armed insurrection which could only exist in the minds of professional Red-baiters.

A number of the expressions used seemed to point to the fact that the forgery had been concocted by White Russian émigrés, who were known to be active in this field, and with whom the appropriate section of the Foreign Office and British Intelligence were known to be in regular contact, and from whom, indeed, they derived most of their "knowledge" about the Soviet Union. Equally suspicious was the delay between the supposed origin of the "letter" (September 15) and its actual publication, the fact that it was the *Daily Mail* that, in the first stage, claimed to have found it, and the fact that at no time, even in the course of all the subsequent enquiries, was the original letter ever produced.

Investigations of the letter continued long after it had successfully fulfilled the purpose for which it was concocted. The Austen Chamberlain Government that followed the fall of MacDonald appointed a special committee of the Tory Cabinet consisting of the Lord Chancellor, an ex-Lord Chancellor, Lord Birkenhead, the Foreign Secretary, an ex-Foreign Secretary, the well-known "impartial" Lord Curzon, together with Lord Cecil. Their finding could hardly come as a surprise to anyone. The Prime Minister, speaking in the House of Commons on December 10, 1924, reported:

"A Sub-Committee of the Cabinet was appointed to consider the authenticity of the document, a copy of which had come into the possession of the Foreign Office, and after examination of the evi-

dence put before them, they came to the unanimous conclusion that there was no doubt that the letter was authentic.”¹

A few days later, asked in the House to disclose the sources of evidence for this decision, Chamberlain replied that the source was the British Secret Service, and:

“the essence of a secret service [is] that it must be secret . . . we are not prepared and do not propose to give to the House or the country . . . the evidence upon which that opinion was based. . . .”²

No one could have expected the engineers of deception to expose their own ingenuity. But what of the Labour leadership? Immediately following the October election, and even before the Conservatives took office, the Labour Cabinet appointed its Committee of Enquiry which reported, characteristically, on November 4, that they had never seen the *original* “letter” and that they were unable to reach a decision whether or not it was genuine.

Neither the Tory nor official Labour Committee of Enquiry found the time to meet the supposed signatories of the “letter” nor to receive evidence from the Communist Party or the Communist International. An offer by M. Rakovsky to Chamberlain “to guarantee the unhindered departure” from the U.S.S.R. of the person alleged to have sent the letter out of the Soviet Union, was never taken up.³ There was, however, a third Committee of Enquiry that genuinely bestirred itself to sort out the evidence at source, and to examine (with the assistance of the C.I.) the archives of the Communist International. This was the representative group appointed by the official T.U.C. Delegation that was touring the U.S.S.R. at the time of the whole affair.

An Interim Report, published on December 9, 1924, under the signatures of A. A. Purcell and Fred Bramley,⁴ reported that the British delegation had now “conducted an exhaustive investigation into the circumstances” with access to the C.I. Archives. The inspection of the archives was carried out (without notice) by Tillett, Grenfell and Young (one with a good knowledge of Russian and another of German).

Their findings as expressed in the Interim Report were as follows:

¹ *History of the Zinoviev Letter*, C.P.G.B., p. 18.

² *Ibid.* This took place on December 15, 1924.

³ On December 22, 1924.

⁴ See text in *History of the Zinoviev Letter*, C.P.G.B., p. 22.

"First, a careful and strict scrutiny of all documents dealt with by Zinoviev's department for a period before and after the alleged date of the letter has been made, and no evidence exists that any such document as printed during the Election in Great Britain was despatched during the period.

"Secondly, all correspondence dealing with the affairs of the Communist Party for the same period has also been examined, and no document even remotely similar in character to the alleged Zinoviev letter left Moscow, or any Soviet or other department, bearing Zinoviev's signature, during the period referred to in the reports, which we have now to denounce as false.

"Thirdly, the Delegation will be able, in the full report of the British Delegation's visit to Russia, to supply further evidence proving the statements we have already made—namely, that the Zinoviev Letter is a forgery, and that the British Foreign Office and the press have used a false document to attack a foreign power and to damage the interests of the British Labour Party."

The Final Report of the T.U.C. Delegation¹ repeated, with additional evidence, the same conclusions. The evidence was such, it maintained:

"That should satisfy all open-minded opinion that the 'Red Letter' was a forgery."

Subsequent developments were to bring new evidence of the justice of the findings of the T.U.C. Delegation. The fact that no Government department could, at any stage of the different enquiries, produce the original of the "letter" did not strengthen belief in its authenticity. Nor did the fact that no legal proceedings were, at any time, taken against Arthur MacManus. Here, indeed, would have been a watertight case of sedition, if the Government had had any hope of proving its case before the law, and a "law" securely biased in its favour.

In 1928 the trial of a Mrs. Aminto M. Bradley Dyne proved her contact with Gregory of the Foreign Office.² The plaintiffs—a firm of City bankers, Ironmonger and Company—divulged that this lady had been introduced to them by Mr. Gregory. On February 1, 1928, the Government appointed a Special Board of Enquiry to investigate the case in so far as it concerned civil servants, including Gregory. Gregory

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-26.

² W. P. and Z. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1943, p. 190.

was finally dismissed the service for encouraging "instead of checking, speculative transactions . . .". Did his "speculative transactions" include the "Zinoviev Letter"? It is worthy of note that in a letter to the *Observer* in March, 1928,¹ Thomas Marlowe, who, in 1924 was Editor of the *Daily Mail*, explained that he was informed of the existence of the "Zinoviev Letter" in a letter "from an old and trusted friend". The letter informed him of the fact that the "document" had been circulated by the Foreign Office to four of its departments. It seems then, that whoever did the forging, the "Zinoviev Letter" originated from *within* the secret recesses of the Foreign Office itself.

In any case, however much the truth of the affair might gradually leak out to posterity, the forgery performed the function for which it had been concocted. As G. D. H. Cole put it:

"the letter and MacDonald and the Foreign Office between them did their work. . . ."²

The General Election took place on October 29, 1924, at the apex of the "Red Scare". The Labour Government was defeated.³

THE OCTOBER ELECTION

Tongue in cheek, Tory candidates and Tory press shouted aloud that a victory for Labour would mean red revolution in Britain. Typical is the Election Address of the Conservative candidate for the Abbey Division of Westminster.⁴

"A vote for the Socialists is a vote for the Communists. They pretend to be separate, but at every crisis we find them together. The same sinister power directs them both, and they both march to the pipers of Moscow under the shadow of the Red Flag. . . .

". . . I am opposed to the supreme decision on matters of foreign

¹ *Observer*, March 4, 1928.

² G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948, p. 169.

³ Long after this chapter had been completed and when the manuscript of this book was being prepared for the press in December 1966-January 1967—a spate of belated revelations and disclosures on the Zinoviev Letter hit the British daily press. I have left the section of my chapter unchanged, and added the substance of the disclosures in Appendix VIII of this chapter. The interesting point is that, in so far as there is any hard evidence in these new disclosures, it confirms the general attitude of the Communist Party at the time of the original "publication" of the Zinoviev Letter.

⁴ In Transport House Library. Quoted by Richard W. Lyman. *op. cit.*, p. 256.

policy being placed, as it is at present, in the hands of the Socialistiche Arbeiter Internationale. . . ."

Along with the Campbell case and the "Zinoviev Letter" all the hardy annuals were scattered through the press—"Communism destroys marriage . . ."; "Red spies disguised as nurses and health visitors"; "Religion will be stamped out"; "Homes will be broken up"; "Children will be taken from their mothers and become property of the State"!¹

In the face of this onslaught the Labour propaganda was pitiful. MacDonald and his colleagues were themselves busy Red-baiting. They were unwilling to put forward a straight and positive case for socialism or to defend friendship with the U.S.S.R. On the "Zinoviev Letter", as we have seen, their defence was delayed, half-hearted and feeble, and whilst the rank-and-file felt in their bones it was a forgery, the leadership, at best, sat insecurely on the fence.

The Communist Party Election Manifesto was published in the *Workers' Weekly* of October 17.² The election must be seen, it explained, as a struggle between the working class and the capitalist class. The key issues of the election were the prosecution of J. R. Campbell and the issue of a Treaty with the U.S.S.R. Both were issues that involved largely the working class and:

"British capitalists are determined not to allow two such challenges to their interests. That is why Liberals and Tories in the constituencies are making a united front against Labour candidates."

The Labour Government, the Manifesto declared, was put in office to do the work of the capitalists, and for six months—on issues at home and abroad—it did so right royally:

"Sheltering itself behind the plea of being in a minority, it did exactly what a capitalist government might have done. It evicted unemployed, overawed strikers by threatening to use the Emergency Powers Act, arrested and spied on Communists, strengthened the Navy and Air Force, shot down and imprisoned workers and peasants in India, Mesopotamia, Sudan and Egypt. In its negotiations with Soviet Russia, it defended the interests of British capitalists, not of British workers. . . . Worst of all, it carried through the infamous Dawes Report. . . ."

¹ Ibid.

² *Workers' Weekly*, October 17, 1924, pp. 1-2.

But then working-class pressure began to exert itself. Under labour pressure the Government was forced to renew negotiations with the U.S.S.R. and to withdraw the charges against J. R. Campbell. And it was this that the British capitalists feared and would not permit. The Labour Government was to be thrown out because, under the pressure of the labour movement, it would no longer fulfil the programme of the capitalists, and there was no knowing where this pressure would stop.

The Party's Manifesto proceeded to draw the lessons. The working class needed a Labour Government, but a Labour Government "that will fight for the working class". Such a government could not operate within a capitalist state, a state which, in effect, expresses the dictatorship of the capitalists. The Labour Government must establish the rule (dictatorship) of the working class. Such a Government must rely on the mass support, the mass action in every form, of the organisations of the working class:

"The dictatorship of the working class means that the Labour Government must look for its support, not to Parliament, but to the mass organisations of the working class. The examples of the Campbell case and the Soviet Treaty show us that only when the Labour Government does this is it sure of carrying out the will of the workers. . . . The C.P. tells the workers that they will have to set up their own government bodies—councils of factory, shop and pit deputies—in order to mobilise the whole strength of the working class in support of a Labour Government genuinely fighting the capitalists."

The Party Manifesto then proceeded to outline the programme of such a genuine Labour Government. What was needed was a "class programme of transitional measures which hurt the capitalists and mobilise the workers" and "will prepare the way for Socialism". It called for a government that would implement the seven measures put forward in the Industrial Workers' Charter adopted at the Hull 1924 T.U.C.—public ownership of national resources, a 44-hour week, a minimum wage, adequate maintenance for the unemployed, proper housing for all, full education for all, adequate maintenance and compensation in case of industrial accidents and diseases, pensions for all at sixty—and then proceeded to complete the Hull Charter with a detailed programme of immediate measures—home, foreign and colonial—

including nationalisation of mines, railways, lands, banks and large-scale industry, capital levy on all fortunes above £5,000, full political rights for members of the armed forces, repeal of all anti-Labour legislation, ratification of the Anglo-Soviet Treaty, repudiation of the Dawes Plan and Versailles Treaty, a World Conference on disarmament and economic co-operation, and independence with complete withdrawal of British troops from all colonial countries.

The Communist Party put forward eight candidates for the General Election,¹ three in London (Battersea North, Bethnal Green, Streatham, Wandsworth), two in Scotland (Dundee and Greenock), one in Lancashire (Rusholme, Manchester), one in Birmingham (Birmingham West), and one in Nottingham (Nottingham East). Four of these candidates (Saklatvala in Battersea, Vaughan in Bethnal Green, Paul in Rusholme and Geddes in Greenock) had stood for the same constituencies in the election of December 1923.

Bob Stewart replaced W. Gallacher as candidate at Dundee. None of the others (Dr. Dunstan in Birmingham, Tom Mann in Nottingham and A. M. Wall in Streatham) had stood in the previous election.

The contradictory position within the Labour Movement—ignominious surrender by the right-wing leadership with growing militancy from the rank and file—was reflected in the contradictory results of the General Election. On the one hand, the abysmal record of the Government from a working-class point of view, and its pitiful vacillation on the issues of the election, led to certain defeat. But, on the other, the growth of Labour pressure meant that, above all in the more militant and solidly working-class and industrial areas, there was, in many cases, an increased Labour vote.

Thus whilst the Conservatives increased their vote by over two million and won the election, the Labour Party, which contested more seats than ever before (515 compared to 428 in 1923) increased its vote by over one million,² with a net loss of 42 seats (gaining 22 and losing 64). The principal sufferers were the Liberals whose poll *fell* by more than one and a quarter million votes. It is very significant that it was precisely in the areas where the class war was most stoutly waged that the Labour vote was most successful, viz. in the mining areas and in the big engineering and shipbuilding centres of Glasgow, Sheffield,

¹ See details in Appendix VII to this chapter.

² G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party from 1914*, p. 169. See also article, "Revolutionary Significance of the General Election", in *Communist Review*, December 1924 and article, "Lessons of Labour Defeats", in *Workers' Weekly*, October 31, 1924, p. 1.

Tyneside, etc. Most of the 22 Labour gains were made in the areas of industrial concentration.¹

Significant too was the very positive result of the Communist candidates in this first General Election in which official Labour support was definitely forbidden. There had been in the course of the first Labour Government one opportunity for the Communist Party to test its influence, i.e. in the by-election at Kelvingrove, a Glasgow constituency, on May 16, 1924.² The Party candidate was Aitken Ferguson, the District Organiser, and a member of the Boilermakers' Union. In this case the Labour ban was not yet operative; the I.L.P. candidate was withdrawn in Ferguson's favour, and he was also officially endorsed by the Scottish Executive of the Labour Party, though not by the National Executive. The result showed a gain of over 1,000 by the Communist candidate and only the mass turn of the Liberal vote over to the Tory lost Ferguson the election.

In October the strict ban imposed by the Labour Party Conference made it impossible for Ferguson to stand, but despite the ban and all the threats of the Labour Party Executive, there was considerable *local* Labour support for several of the Communist candidates.³ The North Battersea Labour Party, for instance, endorsed Saklatvala by 104 votes to 14. Joe Vaughan was endorsed unanimously at a meeting of Management Committee and individual members of the South West Bethnal Green Labour Party. Alfred Wall had local Labour support in Streatham. W. Paul was unanimously supported by the Executive of the Rusholme Labour Party. In the East Nottingham constituency, the Nottingham and District Trades Council amended a resolution to support "all Labour Party candidates" to one of endorsement of "all working-class candidates", and then extended their support to the candidature of Tom Mann. The Communist votes were in all cases substantial.⁴ Whilst Geddes (who was opposed by an I.L.P. candidate) lost 2,740 votes and W. Paul 8 votes compared to the previous election, Vaughan *gained* 773 and Saklatvala 2,755. Joe Vaughan missed victory at Bethnal Green by only 223 votes, and Saklatvala, now for the first time standing as a directly Communist candidate, was returned to Parliament with a majority of 544 over the "Constitutional Liberal". A total of 55,345 votes was polled by the eight Communists standing.

¹ Yorkshire 6; Scotland 4; Midlands 3; North-East 3; London 3; Lancashire 2.

² See *Workers' Weekly*, May 16, 1924, p. 1, and May 30, 1924; also *Report of 24th Conference of Labour Party* (London), pp. 15-16.

³ *Workers' Weekly*, October 17, 1924, and October 24, 1924.

⁴ See Appendix VII to this chapter.

Whilst MacDonald and the Labour leaders were bending over backwards to disclaim connections with Communism (as well they might) and to repudiate the remotest interest in the class struggle (J. H. Thomas, for instance, denounced the "damnable talk of class war" at a capitalist banquet),¹ the election showed that it was precisely where there was class-war talk and class-war in action that the Labour vote was most solid.

When the election was over there was much discussion up and down the country as to why it had, in fact, been held. Why should MacDonald choose to fight an election on such issues as the Campbell Case and Treaty with the Soviet Union? Why, above all, should the British capitalists choose to remove a government that had served them so well?² The essence of the answer was given, already, in the Communist Party's Electoral Manifesto.³

Certainly MacDonald had not been converted to the class struggle and had no desire for a show-down on such living issues as the role of capitalist law or relations with the U.S.S.R. But:

"The class struggle, which the MacDonald Cabinet existed to conceal and deny, has taken its revenge on the MacDonald cabinet!"⁴

The immediate issues of the election—the Soviet Treaty and the Campbell Case—were, certainly, not issues chosen by the MacDonald Government. They were issues that they were doing their best to conceal, but which were forced on them, on the one hand, by the pressure of the capitalists, and on the other, by the pressure of the working class. It was working-class pressure that forced the Government to renew negotiations with the Soviet authorities, though the failure of negotiations had already been publicly announced, just as it was working-class pressure that obliged them to drop the charges against J. R. Campbell. That pressure was growing. It could be applied on other issues and, in this situation, MacDonald, in a sense, was glad to be away. From the time of the Labour Party Conference, "the enemy" became not the Tories, not capitalism, but the Left, the militants, and above all the Communist Party. This made electoral defeat inevitable, but provided the public scapegoat.

¹ See J. R. Campbell, *What is the Use of Parliament?*, C.P.G.B. pamphlet, 1924.

² See "Vote-Catching for Election" in *Workers' Weekly*, October 10, 1924, p. 1, and also R. Palme Dutt, "Notes of the Month" in November and December, 1924, issues of *Labour Monthly* (Vol. VI, Nos. 11 and 12).

³ *Workers' Weekly*, October 17, 1924, pp. 1-2.

⁴ "Notes of the Month", *Labour Monthly*, November, 1924, p. 644.

The same background analysis explains the attitude of the British ruling class to the Labour Government. At first the MacDonaldites performed their duties well. They "continued" capitalist policy, used the power of the state to suppress industrial conflict, supported the Dawes Plan, carried out repressions in India, Iraq and the Sudan. But meanwhile the Left was developing, unofficial strikes continued to spread, a left wing began to develop within the T.U.C., demand from more militant Labour M.P.s for at least some degree of control of Government policy began to be more insistent; even the I.L.P. began to become more critical of the Government; the influence of the Communist Party and the Minority Movement was growing. In a word, the gap between the Labour Movement and the Labour Government was extending. When Left pressure began to impel the Government to take awkward action on two of the holy of holies—the capitalist state (Campbell Case) and capitalist foreign policy (Soviet Treaty), it was clear that the position was becoming dangerous. The Labour Government having, up to a point, fulfilled (from a capitalist point of view) the functions for which it had been licensed, would have to go.

Moreover, always in the background, was the chronic economic position, the continued mass unemployment, the growing world capitalist economic competition. This made inevitable a "show-down" with the working class, an onslaught on living standards, and for that a solid, reliable ruling-class government would be essential.

Thus the offensive, the blood-curdling speeches, the screaming headlines, the "Red Letter", the threats and warnings, and after the short, shouting, slanderous campaign, the establishment of a compact bourgeois government, with an absolute majority, ready to bring the working class to heel.

No sooner was the election over than circles within the Labour Party, who had remained silent during the eight months of office, began to indulge in posthumous criticism. Within a few days the *Daily Herald* was writing:¹

"The chief fault of the Ministry was a tendency to be more official than the politicians of the old parties, and an anxiety on the part of a good many to prove that a Labour Government was no different from any other. That was certainly a mistake."

And the *New Leader*:²

¹ Quoted by R. Palme Dutt in "Notes of the Month" in *Labour Monthly*, December 1924 (Vol. VI, No. 12, p. 708).

² *Ibid.*

"Our period of office ends with moral break-down in two directions. Our Government has prepared the way for Tory coercion in India and for a Tory quarrel with Russia. . . .

"It was no part of our strategy for winning power to court the confidence of the middle class by seeming to be as sound imperialists as Liberals and Tories are. The sudden revelation of an ugly and costly blunder has lit up the road for us and shown us our peril. With or without leaders, untrammelled by a record which we disavow, let us renounce tactics and struggle to be ourselves."

Sentiments such as these would have inspired greater confidence if they had been expressed six months earlier, when the Communist Party stood almost alone in its critique of the reformist capitulation of the MacDonald Government, and when many of the "new critics" were loud in their attacks on the Communists, precisely because of the criticisms they were making. But they did reveal that there was, within the official Labour and trade union organisations, a growing discontent with MacDonaldism and a growing desire to examine Labour policy at its roots.

Already in May, after five months of Labour government, a Party pamphlet—*The Record of the Labour Government*—had summed up the lessons to date. Perhaps one of its conclusions contains most aptly expressed the essential lessons of the First Labour Government:

"the lesson is that a Government cannot be 'above all classes'. If it is not with the working class, it must drift into the arms of the capitalist class. Whether the intentions of the Labour Ministers as individuals were honest at the outset, or whether their declarations about being above class interests were as genuine as similar declarations by Lloyd George and Baldwin, is not a matter of great concern."¹

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX I

Results of Communist Candidates at the General Election of December 1923

(I) COMMUNISTS AS CANDIDATES OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Motherwell

H. Ferguson	Independent	9,793
J. T. Walton Newbold	Communist	8,712
J. Maxwell	Liberal	4,799

¹ *The Record of the Labour Government*, C.P.G.B., p. 30.

Dundee (two seats)

E. Scrymgeour	Independent	25,753
E. D. Morel	Labour	23,345
Sir J. W. Pratt	Liberal	23,031
F. W. Wallace	Unionist	20,253
<i>W. Gallacher</i>	<i>Communist</i>	10,380

(2) COMMUNISTS WITH LOCAL BUT NOT OFFICIAL LABOUR SUPPORT

Greenock

Sir G. P. Collins	Liberal	16,337
<i>A. Geddes</i>	<i>Labour (unofficial)</i>	10,335

Glasgow (Kelvingrove)

W. Hutchinson	Unionist	11,025
<i>A. Ferguson</i>	<i>Labour (unofficial)</i>	10,021
A. J. Grieve	Liberal	4,662

(3) COMMUNISTS STANDING AS OFFICIAL LABOUR CANDIDATES

Ashton-under-Lyne

Sir W. De Frece	Unionist	7,813
H. T. Greenwood	Liberal	7,574
<i>Ellen Wilkinson</i>	<i>Labour</i>	6,208

Battersea (North)

E. Hogbin	Liberal	12,527
<i>S. Saklatvala</i>	<i>Labour</i>	12,341

Gloucester

Lt.-Col. J. N. Horlick	Unionist	8,630
<i>M. Philips Price</i>	<i>Labour</i>	8,127
A. W. Stanton	Liberal	6,011

Manchester (Rusholme)

C. F. G. Masterman	Liberal	10,901
Capt. J. H. Thorpe	Unionist	8,876
<i>W. Paul</i>	<i>Labour</i>	5,366

Bethnal Green (South West)

P. A. Harris	Liberal	5,735
J. J. Vaughan	Labour	5,251
Capt. J. G. Leigh	Unionist	2,267

Increase of vote of Communist Candidates where they had stood in 1922

	1922	1923	% Increase
Newbold	8,262	8,712	5.4%
Gallacher	5,906	10,380	75.7%
Geddes	9,776	10,335	5.6%
Saklatvala	11,311	12,341	9.1%
Vaughan	4,034	5,251	30.2%
Philips Price ¹	7,871	8,127	3.25%

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX II

*Composition of the First Labour Government²**Cabinet*

J. Ramsay MacDonald	Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary
J. R. Clynes	Lord Privy Seal and Deputy Leader of the House
Lord Parmoor	Lord President of the Council
Lord Haldane	Lord Chancellor
Philip Snowden	Chancellor of the Exchequer
Arthur Henderson	Home Secretary
J. H. Thomas	Colonial Secretary
Stephen Walsh	Secretary for War
Lord Olivier	Secretary for India
Lord Thomson	Secretary for Air
Lord Chelmsford	First Lord of the Admiralty
Sidney Webb	President of the Board of Trade
John Wheatley	Minister of Health
Noel Buxton	Minister of Agriculture
William Adamson	Secretary of State for Scotland
C. P. Trevelyan	President of the Board of Education
Thomas Shaw	Minister of Labour

¹ Not fully Communist in 1922.² G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

Vernor Hartshorn	Postmaster-General
J. C. Wedgwood	Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
F. W. Jowett	First Commissioner of Works

Not in Cabinet

H. Gosling	Minister of Transport
F. O. Roberts	Minister of Pensions
Sir Patrick Hastings	Attorney-General
Sir H. H. Slessor	Solicitor-General
Ben C. Spoor	Chief Whip

Under-Secretaries

Amongst the Under-Secretaries were:

W. Graham	Treasury
C. R. Attlee	War
A. V. Alexander	Board of Trade
E. Shinwell	Mines
Margaret Bondfield	Labour
Arthur Greenwood	Health

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX III

C.P.G.B. Circular on the London Traffic Strike, March 1924
(extracts)¹

Circular to all Local and District Party Organisations,
March 28, 1924

Dear Comrades,

The Labour movement is seriously threatened and all our courage and energy will be necessary if we would save it from disaster. The sinister Privy Council which is outside of all parliamentary control is about to declare the metropolis in a State of Emergency. Already a secret committee, under Commander Wedgwood, is making preparations to operate the notorious Emergency Powers Act.

All this because the tramwaymen are on strike backed up by the busmen, with the tube-men ready to fall into line. The solidarity of the men is wonderful. They are setting an example that ought to be followed by every other section of the workers. But while the workers stand firm in their loyalty to each other, their parliamentary leaders

¹ Party Records.

who comprise the Labour Government, have failed to stand this test.

The pressure from the political forces of capitalism has found them prepared to yield. . . .

Comrades, we must prevent this; we must do our best to stop the Labour Government carrying out this contemplated act of treachery. Meetings should be organised wherever possible during the week-end to protest against the attitude of the Government and to rally support for the strikers. Where Labour Party or Independent Labour Party demonstrations are already organised, every effort should be made to get this matter raised. Everywhere the following resolution, drawn up by the National Joint Council of the T.U.C. and the Labour Party, should be passed and sent to the Prime Minister and Minister of Labour:

"That while deploring the suggestion that the government may consider itself obliged to employ the E.P.A., this joint body urges upon the government that, in the event of it using its powers, it should use them to take over the whole of the London Traffic Services, paying the wages and observing the conditions demanded until such time as a Committee, to be immediately set up, has reported as to the best method for permanently settling the traffic problem."

The movement is in danger. All the power of capitalism is being brought to bear on the Labour Government and threatens it with destruction. We must fight capitalism by forcing our leaders to take their stand with the striking workers. If they will not do so, then we must remove them and replace them by those who will.

All Power to the Struggling Workers!

No compromise with Capitalism!

For the Central Committee of the C.P.G.B.,

ALBERT INKPIN, *Secretary*.

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX IV

*The First Leadership of the National Minority Movement*¹

Executive Committee:

<i>President</i>	Tom Mann.
<i>General Secretary</i>	Harry Pollitt.
<i>Organising Secretary</i>	George Hardy.

¹ Report of National Minority Conference held August 23-24, 1924, p. 2.

Treasurer George Fletcher.
Auditors T. R. Strudwick.
 J. Tanner.

Miners Minority Movement:

Nat Watkins (Secretary), A. Horner, A. Booth.

Metal Workers Minority Movement:

W. Hannington (Secretary), W. Ward, H. Pollitt.

Transport Workers Minority Movement:

George Hardy (Secretary), W. Loeber, F. Johnson.

Building Trades:

H. Joy.

Miscellaneous:

F. Smith, J. Logan, S. Elsbury, J. D. Man, T. Quelch.

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX V

Position in the Party Districts, 1924–1925

(1) *Position, May 1924*¹

<i>District</i>	<i>No. of L.P.C.s</i>	<i>Total No. of Local Organisations</i>
London	8	23
Manchester	5	14
Liverpool	3	6
Birmingham	2	5
Bradford	3	8
Sheffield	2	5
Tyneside	5	7
South Wales	7	23
Glasgow	8	17
Unattached	8	27
—	—	—
	51	135

(2) *Position, May 1925*²

<i>District</i>	<i>No. of L.P.C.s</i>	<i>Total No. of Local Organisations</i>
London	12	29
Manchester	6	18

¹ Report of E.C. on "Party Organisation Since Battersea", in Report of Sixth Congress of C.P.G.B., p. 53.

² Organisation Report of E.C. prepared for Seventh Congress in *Report of 7th Congress of C.P.G.B.*, p. 144.

<i>District</i>	<i>No. of L.P.C.s</i>	<i>Total No. of Local Organisations</i>
Liverpool	4	6
Birmingham	2	9
Bradford	5	8
Sheffield	4	9
Tyneside	2	10
South Wales	5	24
Glasgow	11	13
Fife	—	6
Unattached	8	30
	—	—
	59	162

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX VI

The Article that caused the "Campbell Case"

The Article that gave rise to the "Campbell Case" was published in the *Workers' Weekly*, No. 77, of July 25, 1924 (during the Anti-War Week Campaign) under the title *The Army and Industrial Disputes—An Open Letter to the Fighting Forces*. It reads as follows:

Comrades,

You never joined the Army or Navy because you were in love with warfare, or because you were attracted by the glamour of the uniform. In nine cases out of ten you were compelled to join the services after a long fight against poverty and misery caused by prolonged unemployment.

Once in the services, you are subjected to a military discipline that bears down upon you in an ever-increasing manner.

Repressive regulations and irksome restrictions are intentionally imposed upon you. And when war is declared you are supposed to be filled with a longing to "beat the enemy". The enemy consists of working men like yourselves, living under the same slave conditions. But the Government not only organises the services for war, it also keeps them fully equipped to be able to crush their own workers when the need arises.

Have you never noticed how, in large strikes and lock-outs, all the newspapers condemn the strikers, and talk about maintaining the "essential services and the food supplies"? Have you forgotten that

during the Tonypandy strike of railway men in 1911, the soldiers were used and workers were shot? That gunboats were used by Asquith to defeat the dockers in 1912? Have you forgotten how the Labour Government threatened to use naval men during the dockers' strike this year? How in the Tramway strike the Government threatened to introduce E.P.A., which would have forced many of you to have shot your own brothers and fathers? Have you forgotten the miners' lock-out in 1921, when the Reserves were called out, and Hyde Park was turned into a military camp in order that a large section of the Army could be ready to suppress any action that might take place as a result of the Triple Alliance strike?

Soldiers, sailors, airmen, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, the Communist Party calls upon you to begin the task of not only organising passive resistance when war is declared, or when an industrial dispute involves you, but to definitely and categorically let it be known that, neither in the class war nor a military war, will you turn your guns on your fellow workers, but instead will line up with your fellow workers in an attack upon the exploiters and capitalists, and will use your arms on the side of your own class.

Form Committees in every barracks, aerodrome and ship. Let this be the nucleus of an organisation that will prepare the whole of the soldiers, sailors and airmen, not merely to refuse to go to war, or to refuse to shoot strikers during industrial disputes, but will make it possible for the workers, peasants and soldiers, sailors and airmen to go forward in a common attack upon the capitalists, and smash capitalism for ever, and institute the reign of the whole working class.

Refuse to shoot down your fellow workers!

Refuse to fight for profits!

Turn your weapons on your oppressors!

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX VII

Results of Communist Candidates at the General Election of October 1924¹

Battersea North

<i>S. Saklatvala</i>	<i>Communist</i>	<i>15,096</i>
<i>H. Hogbin</i>	<i>Constitutional Liberal</i>	<i>14,552</i>

¹ See *Workers' Weekly*, October 31, 1924, and *Report of 25th Conference of Labour Party*, 1925.

Bethnal Green South West

P. A. Harris	Liberal	6,236
J. J. Vaughan	Communist	6,034
Captain C. P. Norman	Conservative	2,467

Birmingham West

Rt. Hon. Sir Arthur Chamberlain	Conservative	14,801
Dr. R. Dunstan	Communist	7,158

Dundee (2 seats)

E. D. Morel	Labour	32,846
E. Scrymgeour	Prohibitionist	29,193
F. W. Wallace	Conservative	28,118
Sir A. R. Duncan	Liberal	25,566
R. Stewart	Communist	8,340

Greenock

Colonel Sir G. R. Collins	Liberal	12,752
A. Geddes	Communist	7,590
S. Kelly	Labour	5,874

Nottingham East

Brocklesby	Conservative	11,524
Birkett	Liberal	10,078
Tom Mann	Communist	2,605

Manchester (Rusholme)

F. B. Merriman	Conservative	13,341
Rt. Hon. C. F. G. Masterman	Liberal	7,772
W. Paul	Communist	5,328

Streatham (Wandsworth, London)

Sir W. Lane Mitchell	Conservative	15,936
C. G. Parslow	Liberal	4,111
A. M. Wall	Communist	3,204

Comparison of Votes with candidates who stood in December 1923

	Dec. 1923	Oct. 1924	Comparison
Saklatvala	12,341	15,096	+ 2,755
Geddes	10,335	7,590	- 2,740
W. Paul	5,366	5,328	- 8
Vaughan	5,251	6,024	+ 773

Kelvingrove By-Election, May 16, 1924

Captain W. E. Eliot	Conservative	15,488
Aitken Ferguson	Labour	11,167
	(1923 vote 10,021)	
Sir John Platt	Liberal	1,372

CHAPTER III—APPENDIX VIII

The "Zinoviev Letter"

(1) On Sunday, December 11, 1966, the Sunday press reported that the Foreign Office had lost its copy of the famous (infamous?) Note of protest sent to the then Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in London, Mr. Rakovsky.

The source of the report was the latest volume (impending publication) in the series of "Documents of British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939". In this it was revealed that the relevant Foreign Office file was "in a serious condition", and that from it there were some important documents missing.

(2) The next day, December 12, the press generally made clear that the documents missing were (a) the original draft of the letter of protest as it was despatched to MacDonald by the Foreign Office and (b) a carbon copy of the actual letter despatched to Mr. Rakovsky, signed, not by MacDonald himself, but "in the absence of the Secretary of State, J. D. Gregory".

The December 12 issue of the *Morning Star* contained an excellent background summary of the "Zinoviev Letter" affair by Andrew Rothstein.

(3) On Sunday, December 18, the *Sunday Times* on its front page, and at length in the course of its *Weekly Review*, published its findings following an investigation of the "Zinoviev Letter" by Lewis Chester, Stephen Fay, Hugo Young and Anthony Terry.

The investigators had followed up three important sources: (a) They received information from Madame Irina Bellegarde, now living in London, who was, admittedly, the widow of one of those who had forged the letter, (b) they had examined extracts from the Secret Diary of the mysterious businessman, Mr. Donald im Thurn, and (c) they had seen the personal papers of the late Major Guy Kindersley, a former Conservative M.P.

Madame Bellegarde, the daughter of a Russian naval officer and landowner, went with her family into exile in 1919. She married, in Berlin, Alexis Bellegarde, a former officer in the Russian Imperial Artillery "who was to be a central figure in the drafting of the Zinoviev Letter". She gave detailed evidence that it was prepared by her husband with his friend Gumanski and others, and that "the request for such a letter had come from 'a person of authority' in London. From the outset it was assumed that the letter would be used by some member of the English Establishment for his own purposes" (*Sunday Times*, December 18, 1966).

Im Thurn, wrote the investigators, was the grandson of a prosperous Swiss business man, who had "spent the war in MI5" and now (1924) "worked for a mysterious White Russian Company, the Russian Steamship Navigation Co."

From his diary and the papers of Major Kindersley, the *Sunday Times* investigators concluded: (a) That "im Thurn worked assiduously to ensure that the letter was circulated in Whitehall, and thereby published as genuine in the press", and (b) that "he told the Tories, two weeks before the election, that the letter existed, and they agreed to pay im Thurn, as a fee to his informant, the sum of £5,000." Or as they put it in another passage:

"Last week the *Sunday Times* came across another set of documents which show that high officials of the Conservative Central Office took part in secret deals to secure the maximum political effect for the Zinoviev Letter—for which they promised money and an implied knighthood."

(4) On December 19, 1966, Andrew Rothstein published a detailed article in the *Morning Star*, showing how little of the conclusions of the *Sunday Times* investigations was really new, and how much of the information about the origins and circumstances of the forgery had already been published in a small book entitled "Anti-Soviet Forgeries", published by British progressives in 1927.

All sorts of "bits and pieces" began now to emerge.

(5) Mr. George Brown, Foreign Secretary, with his inimitable tact, on December 19, 1966, indignantly denied that the Foreign Office's copy of the "Zinoviev Letter" was missing, a fact that nobody had suggested, but admitted that the two documents, alleged to be missing, *were* missing. With the authenticity of the document he was not concerned, but added: "I am not at all surprised that the Conservative Central Office thought it worth while paying £5,000 for a document in 1924" (*The Times*, December 20, 1966).

(6) Philip Noel Baker, Labour M.P. for Derby South, in a letter to *The Times* of December 22, offered a further piece of evidence that the "Letter" was a forgery:

"The late Sir Walford Selby was Principal Private Secretary to Mr. Ramsay MacDonald in the Foreign Office before and during the 1924 election. He remained as Principal Private Secretary until 1932, serving Sir Austen Chamberlain, Mr. Arthur Henderson and Sir John Simon. Sir Walford told me many years afterwards—I think it was during the Second World War—that in 1925 the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police had assured him in confidence that, as Chief Commissioner, he had come into possession of absolute proof that the Zinoviev letter was a forgery."

(7) Mr. W. N. Ewer, who was the Foreign Editor of the *Daily Herald* in 1924, wrote to the *Sunday Times* (January 1, 1967) also commenting how much of the *Sunday Times* revelations had been known and published much earlier, for instance in *The Soviets in World Affairs* by Louis Fischer in 1930. He related how he himself told the Foreign Office that the "Letter" was a forgery on the day of its publication, and how Philips Price, who had been a *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in Russia, had been of the same opinion.

(8) On January 1, 1967, the *Sunday Times*' investigators returned to the fray. They established from the Radley School magazine that Donald im Thurn, "the MI5 man turned City gent", "threw a cricket ball harder, straighter and farther than many men who played first class cricket". But they considered that, despite this, "his machinations do not provide a complete explanation for the strange conduct of the Foreign Office in 1924".

But was it so strange? In the same article they investigated the role of J. D. Gregory, whose involvement in the intrigue had long been

commented on by the Communist press. It was Gregory, head of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office, who signed the Note of protest in MacDonald's absence.

They pointed out that "he had energetically opposed the signature of the Treaty with the Soviets. . . . Earlier in 1924, he had welcomed representations from White Russian exiles, saying that he would see them 'unofficially' at any time. . . ." And, examining the end of his career, they added, "Gregory's dabbling in the outside world got the better of him. A Treasury enquiry in 1928 found him guilty of currency speculation, and he was dismissed from the foreign service."

(9) On January 8, 1967, Robin Bruce-Lockhart, engaged in preparing a life of Sidney Reilly, claimed that it was this famous "master spy" who was really responsible for the "Zinoviev Letter".

I must, alas (January 12, 1967), leave the matter there, and to posterity and those fortunate socialist historians who will one day, in a socialist Britain, plough through the multifarious manuscripts of MI5, to establish the final truth and the exact role of the Foreign and Tory Central Offices.

But it would seem that there is enough evidence to establish that the position of the British Communist Party when the "Zinoviev Letter" was first produced has been amply proved correct—the "Letter" was a forgery; it was produced by White Russians; British reaction (state, business and Tories) connived in different forms; and Ramsay MacDonald, classic reformist statesman, prisoner of his own (capitalist) state, allowed an anti-Soviet forgery to be used not only against the Communist Party but against the labour movement and even the Labour Government.

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